# ENGLISH TEACHING FORUM




VOLUME 59 · NUMBER 3 · 2021

ENGLISH TEACHING
FORUM

Volume 59 | Number 3 | 2021



*English Teaching Forum*, published quarterly by the United States Department of State for teachers of English, is distributed abroad by U.S. embassies. Questions about subscriptions should be addressed to the Public Affairs Office of the nearest U.S. embassy.

In the United States, Canada, and other countries, annual subscriptions to individuals and institutions are available through the U.S. Superintendent of Documents: **http://bookstore.gpo.gov**

**US ISSN 1559-663X (print)**
**ISSN 1559-6621 (online)**

**JOHN RUCYNSKI, JR. AND CALEB PRICHARD**
Japan

# Implementing Humor Instruction into English Language Teaching

**In my first year teaching English at a university in Japan, I (John) wanted to give my students something different for a Friday lesson: sharing one of my favorite episodes of the American television show *The Simpsons*. I selected about ten of the funniest jokes from the episode and envisioned jealous colleagues curious about the enthusiastic laughter coming from my classroom. Unfortunately, instead, my silent classroom probably made them wonder if I had given a test that day.**

Why were *The Simpsons* jokes met with such silence? From a cultural perspective, humor may be a universal feature of all cultures, but what is considered funny varies greatly from culture to culture. From a language-teaching perspective, at least three key mistakes prevented the lesson from being a successful integration of humor and language teaching. First, not enough scaffolding was done. I mistakenly assumed that my Japanese students would be familiar with the show and its style of humor. Second, there was no connection between that particular episode and the class content. In other words, there was no goal of the lesson, other than merely wanting the students to appreciate American humor. Third, there were no opportunities for students to engage with the humor. It was a failed humor lesson of the teacher merely trying (more and more desperately) to explain why something was funny.

One reason we share this anecdote is that it reflects why some teachers avoid including humor in the English language classroom. They claim that humor is simply too complex and will merely cause confusion. By writing this article, however, we argue that the benefits of implementing humor instruction in the English teaching curriculum far outweigh the disadvantages or difficulties. Considering this, I (John again) did not abandon *The Simpsons* or other forms of humor as part of English instruction. Rather, I made clips from the show part of a thematic unit on humor and American social issues (Rucynski 2011), but I greatly adapted my teaching approach, based on ideas described later in this article.

A farewell message I received from one of the students in the course two years later, when the student was graduating from university, perhaps best encapsulates why I attempted to use humor in my teaching in the first place. The student wrote, "After your class, I went on to watch almost every *Simpsons* episode. It kept me motivated to study English and helped me to communicate with Americans when I studied abroad. My goal is to someday

watch these episodes without subtitles." In this article, we will discuss the *why* and the (much more complex) *how* of implementing a focus on humor into English language teaching.

## WHY INCLUDE HUMOR INSTRUCTION?

There is a common misconception that including humor in language teaching is merely a fun or frivolous element that is used to occasionally spice up classes. While humor does indeed have the power to make learning more fun and memorable, it can also serve a much deeper purpose in language education. A lack of understanding of the humor of the target culture can cause embarrassment or isolation for learners (Lems 2013). Learners are likely to encounter humor in conversations in the second language (L2) but suffer from anxiety about how to actively engage with the humor (Shively 2018). Helping our students become more familiar with the humor of English-speaking cultures thus empowers them by improving their intercultural communicative competence, as humor is a great way to bond with target-language speakers (Rucynski and Prichard 2020). As John's former student wrote, familiarity with *The Simpsons*, as just one example of American humor, helped him to communicate with American people.

L2 humor competence is an integral component of becoming proficient in a foreign language. This involves not merely appreciating the humor of foreign cultures, but also understanding how it is used. The timing, frequency, and purpose of humor greatly vary from culture to culture. When people use humor, there is often incongruity between the literal and intended meanings of their words. English language learners with a high level of humor competency have the ability to decode the message and to identify the true purpose of the humor (e.g., just making a joke, criticizing a person or situation).

On a related note, acquiring humor competency in a foreign language also helps learners develop critical-thinking skills. English language learners will encounter a great amount of humor as they navigate the Internet and social media platforms. The ability to decipher the meaning of political memes and distinguish satirical news items from real news items is an essential component of the increasingly important twenty-first-century skills of digital and media literacy.

## HOW TO IMPLEMENT HUMOR INSTRUCTION INTO LANGUAGE TEACHING

The first step in the process is determining the purpose of including humor. Is the goal to teach *with* humor or teach *about* humor? While the two goals often overlap, we refer to teaching *with* humor as the teacher using any humorous techniques (e.g., giving funny examples, telling humorous anecdotes) to improve the atmosphere of the class and make language learning more enjoyable and memorable. On the other hand, teaching *about* humor (the focus of this article) refers to helping learners improve their competency with humor of the target culture(s). An increasing amount of research has focused on teaching *about* humor in the context of language teaching. Research ranges from humor competency training on specific types of humor—including jokes (Pimenova 2020), satirical news (Prichard and Rucynski 2019), and sarcasm (Kim and Lantolf 2018; Prichard and Rucynski 2020)—to developing extensive taxonomies of microskills to help learners better understand L2 humor (Wulf 2010).

Teaching *about* humor, however, certainly does not entail the teacher giving dry academic lectures about the humor customs of different cultures. Humor instruction can be implemented by using practical, engaging, and interactive learner-centered activities. Still, it is vital to establish the purpose and goals for introducing humor. As explained in the introduction, humor instruction should have a strong connection with the course curriculum. Bell and Pomerantz (2016) propose a backward design model when teaching learners about humor. In other

**The cultural background, proficiency level, and needs of your learners should greatly inform what aspect of humor instruction you implement into the curriculum.**

words, just like the teaching of any language point, teaching about humor requires identifying the target results. Why does the teacher believe it is important for learners to understand this aspect of humor, and what are the best techniques for teaching it as part of the curriculum?

Bell and Pomerantz (2016, 170) also suggest four possible results of humor instruction:

1. *Identification*. Learners detect that humor is being used.
2. *Comprehension*. Learners are able to understand the intended meaning of the humor.
3. *Response*. Learners are able to properly react to the humor, such as commenting on the funniness (or "unfunniness"!) of the humor or replying with their own humor.
4. *Production*. Learners actually create their own humor.

Bell and Pomerantz (2016) further stress the importance of researching respective forms of humor. Just as a language teacher needs extensive knowledge of a grammar point in order to teach it, teachers who aim to provide instruction on a respective form of humor need to ask, "What linguistic structures, lexical items, and cultural understanding will learners need to achieve the desired results?" (Bell and Pomerantz 2016, 179).

Instruction on respective forms of humor does not always need to include a focus on all four desired results. For example, the ability to identify and comprehend English satirical news can help English language learners to improve their digital and media literacy, but not many teachers would task learners with producing their own satirical news. While humor production in the L2 can be a creative and fun challenge for learners, Bell and Pomerantz (2016) stress that the end goal of humor instruction is not to produce "funny students," but "to familiarize learners with a variety of conventional practices around humorous interaction, so that they are better able to take part in it" (170).

## A FRAMEWORK FOR INCLUDING HUMOR INSTRUCTION IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

Despite these clear potential goals of humor instruction outlined by Bell and Pomerantz (2016), it still can be difficult to imagine how to realize these goals from a practical standpoint. Teachers need to carefully consider which aspects of humor to include in language instruction, what kinds of activities and resources can best facilitate this instruction, and which of the four aforementioned results should be the focus (Rucynski and Prichard 2020). The teaching context is vital when considering humor instruction. In other words, the cultural background, proficiency level, and needs of your learners should greatly inform what aspect of humor instruction you implement into the curriculum. As an example, attempting to teach sarcasm to a group of absolute beginners would make little pedagogical sense. On the other hand, we often include a unit on sarcasm for our Japanese students who are preparing to study abroad, as they are likely to encounter this form of humor in English-speaking countries, and previous students have expressed confusion about it. It is important to help learners fill in the gaps in their humor competence.

We will now take a deeper look at three specific types of humor by explaining the

rationale for including a focus on each type and providing possible activities and resources for the relevant potential results of humor instruction. In addition, we will provide suggestions for modifying the instruction for learners of different proficiency levels. While there are countless types of humor to choose from, the forms of humor we will focus on in this article are verbal irony, memes, and satirical news. Teachers should consider their own teaching context when deciding which forms of humor to include; they should be able to answer "Yes" to the following three questions before making a respective type of humor a part of their humor instruction:

1. Are learners likely to encounter this form of humor when communicating (either face-to-face or online) in the target language?

2. Is this form of humor likely to be challenging for students to understand (e.g., because of a relative lack of the same humor in their native culture)?

3. Does instruction on this form of humor provide value beyond just humor (e.g., insights into the target culture)?

## HUMOR INSTRUCTION FOR VERBAL IRONY

### Rationale

In the context of English language teaching, learners would greatly benefit from a deeper understanding of verbal irony, including sarcasm (Prichard and Rucynski 2020). Learning a language requires much more than just memorizing vocabulary and grammar rules, as learners also need to differentiate between an interlocutor's actual words and *intended* meaning. This is no easy task, especially for learners who come from cultures with a relative lack of sarcasm. We were reminded of this several years ago when we were visiting the United States and boarded a long-distance bus. Just before departing, the driver looked back to see that the bus was only at about ten percent capacity and shouted out in a straight voice, "No fighting over the seats!" In moments like this, we often put ourselves in the shoes of our current Japanese university students. A great majority of our students would understand every English word in that sentence, but may be perplexed by the intended meaning, considering that sarcasm is relatively rare in Japan and it is also uncommon to make such a joke with complete strangers.

Failure to detect or understand sarcasm can quickly lead to confusion or embarrassment. However, sarcasm remains a ubiquitous feature of conversation in English-speaking countries. Some may argue that sarcasm is merely a negative form of humor that is best avoided in the context of the language classroom, but it is more complex than that, as verbal irony can include both sarcasm (positive language with negative intent) and jocularity (negative language with positive intent) (Rothermich and Pell 2015). So, without a proper understanding of verbal irony, an English learner could easily be confused by sarcasm, such as being told, "Nice job!" when making a mistake. They could also be hurt by well-intentioned jocularity, such as if they humbly say, "Sorry, I'm not a good cook," after preparing a delicious meal and being told, "Oh yeah, you're such a terrible cook!"

### Identifying sarcasm

Before teaching students the strategies for identifying sarcasm, teachers can show simple literal and nonliteral examples. In pairs or groups, learners can try to induce which ones are sarcastic, and they can try to identify cues they notice or share other cues that they know (Prichard and Rucynski 2020).

The teacher can then highlight the various verbal and nonverbal cues that learners could not identify on their own. Vocal cues (prosody) include exaggerated stress or intonation, elongated syllables, a monotonous tone, and slower speech. Visual cues include a blank face, averted gaze, glaring, and winking (Rothermich and Pell 2015). Teachers may make use of a range of visuals and audio or video resources to demonstrate these

cues without needing to rely on technical terminology. We highly recommend introducing sarcasm not with fast-paced scenes from movies or TV shows, but instead with examples that are easier to understand, especially in the initial recognition stage. Proper scaffolding with numerous examples helps prevent the humor-instruction failure described at the beginning of this article.

Teachers can also demonstrate verbal cues for the class. To make the instruction interactive, teachers make two similar statements, one sincere and one sarcastic. The class then attempts to identify the sarcastic remark. One example John uses with his class is the following:

> **Statement #1:** I love baseball. It's so exciting.
>
> **Statement #2:** I love soccer. It's sooooo exciting.

The learners guess alone, then discuss their answers with a partner or group. They can also share which cues they identified. The teacher then goes over the answer. (The elongated stress in the second statement reveals that John finds soccer to be boring and prefers baseball.)

Teachers could also demonstrate visual cues, but a plethora of online examples are accessible. A search for "sarcastic expression" on Google Images will provide hundreds of examples. Again, to make the lesson more interactive and engaging, the teacher could provide images of several different faces and task learners with identifying the ones that are most likely to express sarcasm.

For learners less familiar with sarcasm, teachers can provide written dialogues to help train learners to identify illogical statements that do not fit the context. One example is the following:

> A: How's your day going?
>
> B: Not bad. And you?
>
> A: I failed my math test, my girlfriend broke up with me, and then I got stuck in the rainstorm without an umbrella.
>
> B: It sounds like you're having a wonderful day!

The final line by Speaker B should easily be identifiable as a sarcastic statement.

In addition to identifying the sarcastic statement, learners could be given two short, similar dialogues and asked to identify the one that includes sarcasm.

**Dialogue #1:**

> A: Do you like your new teacher?
>
> B: He gives a lot of homework, never smiles, and doesn't remember my name. Yes, I love my new teacher.

**Dialogue #2:**

> A: Do you like your new teacher?
>
> B: She has an exciting teaching style, and the class time always goes by very fast. Yes, I love my new teacher.

Again, this could be a collaborative task with the purpose of developing competence. The teacher can guide learners, as needed. (The incongruity in Dialogue #1 could help learners to identify its sarcasm.)

#### Comprehending sarcasm

We may assume that if a speaker is being sarcastic, then the true meaning is just the opposite of what was said, but this is not always the case. The literal meaning may be simply an exaggeration or understatement of the speaker's true meaning. Moreover, students should understand the various implications and roles of sarcasm, which could be to amuse, to lighten criticism, to bond with a peer, or to achieve some other purpose (Prichard and Rucynski 2020).

The teacher can give the learners several examples, and students, working in pairs or groups, discuss the speaker's true meaning. For example, for the following dialogue, they may discuss whether Speaker B liked the movie and the reason.

A: Did you like the movie I suggested?

B: I slept through half of it. I just love three-hour movies … ! Next time, you should invite me to a *four*-hour movie. Ha ha. (*smiling*)

Students may deduce that Speaker B didn't enjoy the movie because it was too long. They then brainstorm the purpose of the sarcasm (perhaps to lighten the mood despite the criticism). The teacher can help point out cues the students could not recognize.

### Responding to sarcasm

Training learners to respond to sarcasm is complicated, as sarcasm *can* be a rather negative form of humor. Sarcasm, however, takes many forms and is not always used to criticize the interlocutor, but rather another target. So the speaker may merely be expecting agreement. When it comes to jocularity, the speaker may actually be complimenting the interlocutor, but by using negative words with positive intent.

It is best for the teacher to advise learners that they should not feel forced to agree with sarcasm when it is political or biting, but that with more casual topics, people tend to play along with sarcasm as a conversational norm (Colston 2017). For example, a common conversation starter in England is the sarcastic statement, "Lovely weather we're having." If the interlocutor takes such a greeting literally, they might be tempted to reply with something like, "Actually, I don't like the rain." The social expectation, however, is to simply agree with a similarly sarcastic response such as, "Yes, lovely, isn't it?"

Learners should also be informed, however, that when they get to know someone well, it is perfectly natural to either play along with or disagree with sarcastic statements. One way to practice this would be for the teacher to make an obviously sarcastic statement and ask learners to state their agreement or disagreement with the intended meaning. Learners could be given a range of responses for either category, as shown in Table 1.

### Producing sarcasm

Some teachers may question whether they want to teach their students how to be sarcastic. However, practicing sarcastic and sincere statements can reinforce the sarcasm cues introduced by the teacher while making the class more engaging. A simple way to do this is to ask each student to prepare a pair of statements that include one sincere and one sarcastic utterance (similar to the popular "Two Truths and a Lie" icebreaker). Students should start with conversational topics that they have a common understanding about, such as sports, musicians, or actors. As with our previous example, students could say they like two sports (or two musicians, etc.), and their group members need to guess the sincere and sarcastic statements. To add to the activity, students could be tasked with using a different cue each time (e.g., a verbal cue such as exaggerated intonation for one statement and a visual cue like eye rolling for another). However, the teacher should warn the class about the risks of having their sarcasm misunderstood.

| Sarcastic statement (teacher) | Responses for agreeing | Responses for disagreeing |
|---|---|---|
| I just love watching soccer. It's sooooo exciting. | • I'm not into soccer, either.<br>• Yeah, soccer is boring, isn't it?<br>• Yeah, I'd rather watch _____. | • Hey, soccer *is* exciting!<br>• Actually, I love watching soccer.<br>• Are you being sarcastic? Soccer is a great sport! |

**Table 1. Examples of responses for agreeing or disagreeing with a sarcastic statement**

### Suggestions for different proficiency levels

For lower-proficiency learners, teachers can provide much more visual support to show contextual cues clearly. For example, show a picture of a rainstorm or blizzard with the statement, "Lovely weather, isn't it?" to illustrate that verbal irony expresses the opposite of the true intention or reality. In addition, students do not need to be taught the technical vocabulary for visual cues of sarcasm (e.g., blank face, averted gaze), as these can easily be demonstrated. Finally, the teacher can provide transcripts for any practice dialogues to ensure that learners catch and understand all the necessary vocabulary.

While more-proficient learners will also benefit from an overview of visual cues, the teacher can give authentic examples with verbal cues and vocabulary that are more sophisticated. The teacher can also provide examples showing how sarcasm is used for serious topics. For example, speakers often use sarcasm to criticize political figures or comment on social issues.

## HUMOR INSTRUCTION FOR MEMES

### Rationale

Social-media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter provide English language learners the opportunity to interact in English with millions of people around the world. Memes rapidly spread with the progression of the Internet and are now a ubiquitous feature of social media. *Image macros*, a popular form of memes, are easily recognizable by their template of a single image with text in all caps above and below the image. Image macros can range from funny comments about trivial daily events to biting criticism about social issues or political figures.

English language learners benefit from a deeper understanding of English memes for several reasons. First, social media offers free opportunities for English learners, and they will certainly encounter memes if they use social media in English. Improving their ability to comprehend and respond to memes can make learners more active and confident social-media users. Second, memes generally offer short messages, giving students the opportunity to learn vocabulary and English expressions in context. In addition, memes offer insights into English-speaking cultures, as they often feature images of famous figures, ranging from sports figures (LeBron James) to movie characters (Willy Wonka) and even to Muppets (Kermit the Frog). Finally, familiarity with memes can deepen understanding of how humor is used in different cultures, as memes are often used as commentary on social issues.

### Identifying and comprehending memes

For this form of humor, the stages of identification and comprehension can be combined. After all, students should be able to instantly recognize a meme, but the bigger challenge is to identify the different common memes and comprehend the set message conveyed by different established memes. As suggested by Henderson (2017) and Ohashi (2017), a good starting point for identifying and comprehending memes is to familiarize learners with some of the most well-known examples of English memes, making use of the popular image-macro type of meme.

| Match the Meme Character in Column 1 With the Text in Column 2 | |
|---|---|
| Bad Luck Brian | 1. YOU LOOK HAPPY<br>STOP IT |
| Grumpy Cat | 2. LATE TO WORK<br>BOSS WAS EVEN LATER |
| Success Kid | 3. FINDS WATER IN THE DESERT<br>DROWNS |

**Table 2. Matching activity using popular image-macro memes**

The answers are Bad Luck Brian (3), Grumpy Cat (1), and Success Kid (2).

Teachers should select the memes that they feel would be most comprehensible and interesting for their learners, but three examples to start with could be the famous meme characters Bad Luck Brian (an awkward teenager whose unlucky experiences are the punch line), Grumpy Cat (an angry-looking feline that shows displeasure with everything), and Success Kid (a child grasping his fist to show his pleasure at a small victory). To help learners become familiar with the pattern of each meme, teachers can ask learners to match the character with a sample text (Henderson 2017). The text should be displayed to indicate the top and bottom sections of each meme. See Table 2 for an example. (At this stage, learners can be allowed to check their dictionaries for any unknown vocabulary.)

To help students improve their ability to understand English punch lines, teachers can task students with matching the top and bottom captions for the same meme character (Ohashi 2017). Again, learners can use their dictionaries at this stage, if necessary. See Table 3 for an example using Success Kid.

#### Responding to memes

Compared to sarcasm, responding to memes should be an easier challenge for language learners, considering that they are a written form of humor shared on social media, giving learners more time to process the humor than the natural speed and randomness with which sarcasm is used in conversation. One safe and interactive way to have learners practice responding to memes is to create a class-only online site or make use of a learning management system (LMS). An LMS restricted to only students and the teacher is also a safe place for learners to share memes they find and like and express confusion or ask for clarification if they do not understand certain memes. Learners could be tasked with responding to their classmates' shared memes and asking for clarification, as in Table 4.

#### Producing memes

Memes also provide a safe and friendly format for learners to practice producing their own humor. Many people make their own memes, and English language learners can certainly do the same, with enough support and training. There are free websites where students can easily learn to create their own memes and share them with classmates (see, for example, https://imgflip.com/memegenerator and https://makeameme.org/).

Activities can progress from more restricted (all class members creating a meme based on a well-known meme character or two) to more open. Humor instruction is most effective when the humor is not merely humor for the sake of humor, but when it complements or expands on other aspects of the language-learning curriculum. If the teacher gives students a writing assignment about a happy or lucky experience, creating a meme using Success Kid is a fun way for learners to visualize and share the contents of their writing. Additionally, writing about an unlucky experience could be complemented by an original Bad Luck Brian meme, and an activity about pet peeves could be expanded with a Grumpy Cat meme.

| Match the Top Text in Column 1 With the Bottom Text in Column 2 | |
|---|---|
| 1. PUT CANDY BAR IN SHOPPING CART | A. DIDN'T GET SAUCE ON IT |
| 2. ATE SPAGHETTI WHILE WEARING A WHITE SHIRT | B. GOT INVITED OUT TO DINNER |
| 3. FORGOT TO GO GROCERY SHOPPING | C. WITHOUT MOM NOTICING |

**Table 3. Example of Success Kid activity matching top and bottom text**

The answers are 1/C (children often plead with their parents to buy them candy while grocery shopping); 2/A (we often unluckily spill food on our clothes when we are wearing white); and 3/B (this describes the feeling of something lucky happening after we make a mistake).

### Suggestions for different proficiency levels

Of the three types of humor explored in this article, memes are likely the most accessible for lower-proficiency learners, as they include visual support (the main image), employ short messages (only two lines of text), and often feature repetition (famous characters that are always used to convey similar messages). As a result, most of the activities described in this section should be appropriate for lower-level learners.

For more-proficient learners, the teacher can introduce memes that illustrate messages that are more complex than those conveyed through famous characters such as Success Kid. For example, another famous meme character is Condescending Wonka. These memes depict a screen capture of Gene Wilder in the movie *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory* and feature heavily sarcastic messages. The teacher could also introduce political memes, especially during an election cycle, to help learners raise their awareness about how humor is used to comment on social issues in English-speaking countries.

## HUMOR INSTRUCTION FOR ONLINE SATIRICAL NEWS

### Rationale

Satirical news can refer to either satirical TV news programs such as *The Daily Show* or satirical digital media such as *The Onion*. In this article, we will focus on the latter format, as we find it to be a more accessible form of humor for English language learners. Online satirical news is another ubiquitous feature of social media in the English-speaking world. Satirical news mimics real news to mock or satirize everything from trivial daily matters (e.g., shopping manners) to serious social issues (e.g., politics and elections). *The Onion*, published in the United States, is now arguably the most famous satirical news site in the world, with over 6.3 million likes on Facebook. This form of humor is also common in other English-speaking countries, with popular examples including *The Daily Mash* (U.K.), *The Beaverton* (Canada), and *The Shovel* (Australia).

English language learners can benefit from exposure to online satirical news. One reason is that they are likely to encounter satirical news on social media, but they may mistake it for real news if they are not familiar with this type of humor. Again, it is important to use types of humor that are challenging (for linguistic or cultural reasons) for students to understand, but then provide humor instruction to make this type of humor more accessible. Mistaking satirical news for real news can cause confusion or embarrassment for learners. Another reason is that the ability to recognize different forms of news (e.g., satirical news, fake news) is an increasingly important part of the twenty-first-century skills of digital and media literacy. Finally, as with other forms of humor, exposure to satirical news provides cultural insights into English-speaking countries. Learners can improve their understanding of important figures and events and see how humor is sometimes used as social criticism.

### Identifying satirical news

Satirical news items can be tricky to recognize, as they are designed to mimic the

| Expressions for Liking a Meme | Expressions Asking for Clarification |
|---|---|
| That's a good one! | What does _____ mean? |
| It took me a while, but now I get it! | I'm not sure I get this one. Why is it funny? |
| That's (funny / hilarious / hysterical)! | I don't get it. Can you explain what the joke is? |
| I know how (he /she) feels! | Does this mean that _____? |
| HAHA / HEHE / LOL / ROTFL | Is this funny because _____? |

**Table 4. Expressions for liking a meme and asking for clarification**

appearance of real news. We will introduce two possible approaches to training English language learners to recognize satirical news, one involving stylistic cues and one involving critical-reading and critical-thinking skills. Although satirical news does mimic real news, cues about the appearance and writing style can also help learners to distinguish between satirical and real news. One hint is in the headline. Many satirical news sites might use particularly large font sizes and capitalize all words in the headlines (even articles and prepositions), giving a more tabloid-like appearance. Other stylistic hints include casual headlines (e.g., using slang expressions that might not be used in headlines of real news) or vague details (e.g., referring to a "local man" rather than using a name).

As mentioned, the ability to recognize different forms of media is an important aspect of digital and media literacy. A second approach to helping learners recognize satirical news is to focus on the content of the articles and use critical-reading and critical-thinking skills to determine whether the respective stories could be real news. Several cues could be part of training to assist learners in improving their ability to detect satire. As a starting point, learners can consider the following two questions when trying to recognize different forms of media:

1. Is the article newsworthy?

2. Is the article believable?

About the first question, consider a sample headline from *The Onion*: "Grandfather A Man Of Few Shirts." Would a story about a grandfather's wardrobe really make the news? To address the second question, learners can be informed that one device used by satirical news writers is to put famous figures in absurd or incongruous situations. For example, a headline from *Onion Gamers Network* (a section of *The Onion* devoted to video games) in 2020 read, "While Abraham Lincoln Was Great In Many Ways, We At OGN Must Examine His Troubling Legacy Of Never Playing Video Games." It is an obviously absurd and unbelievable headline, considering that Lincoln was president of the United States roughly 100 years before the first video game was even created!

One activity we have used in our English reading courses is to design practice tests that include a mixture of satirical news items and offbeat but true news items. The teacher can provide a mix of items with just the headline and a blurb from each article. Just providing a segment of the articles is sufficient, for two reasons. First, this mimics how satirical news items appear on social media. Second, readers can usually identify satirical news from just the headline or the first line or two of an article. For example, two of the following articles are offbeat but true news items, while two are from satirical sources:

1. Bear necessities? Furry visitor on the prowl in California store

2. World's scientists admit they just don't like mice

3. 'UFO' in Congo jungle turns out to be Internet balloon

4. Study reveals: Babies are stupid

Using the previous two critical-thinking prompts, learners can hopefully identify that number two and number four come from satirical news. (Both satirical items are from *The Onion*, while the true stories come from the "Oddly Enough" section of Reuters.) Hints that could be used to identify the different forms of news include the following:

- #1 is believable, as there are often news stories about wildlife encroaching on human communities.

- #2 would be absurd, as professional scientists would not state that they do not like rodents.

- #3 is also believable, as it is common for UFO sightings to later be followed by a rational explanation.

- #4 is also absurd. In addition, a slang or offensive term like "stupid" is not commonly used in real news articles.

#### Comprehending satirical news

While teachers can provide learners with cues to help them recognize satirical news with some practice, actually comprehending the humor is a more challenging task. In addition to common English challenges like vocabulary, understanding satirical news often requires a high degree of cultural literacy and awareness of current events. Still, this should be seen as a worthwhile challenge. Examining the humor of a culture can also lead to a deeper awareness of and interest in politics and social issues. This is also an example of how humor instruction can have value beyond just the humor. Exposure to politics or social issues through satirical news leads to increased background knowledge and empowers English language learners to improve digital and media literacy.

Increasing comprehension of English satirical news can be promoted by classroom collaboration, both student-to-student and student-to-teacher. For example, the teacher can provide learners with a selection of satirical news headlines and task them with writing an explanation of the meaning. In other words, what is the article really expressing? Who or what is the target of the humor? In the safe environment of the language classroom, learners can enjoy the process of comparing ideas and answers until the teacher offers a final explanation. This process could start with teacher-selected articles and progress to students selecting their own articles from a range of satirical sites suggested by the teacher. One out-of-class assignment we have set is tasking students with choosing a certain number of articles they find humorous and a selection of articles they find confusing. Learners compare the types of humor they find funny and collaborate to decipher the difficult examples.

#### Responding to satirical news

Again, failure to recognize satirical news on social media can be confusing or embarrassing for English language learners. As with memes, however, the language classroom provides a safe environment where students can share and respond to satirical news. A class-only online page is easy to create, as we also suggested for sharing and responding to memes. Considering that this is a safe environment for learners to examine and deepen their understanding of English humor, class replies can include either an appreciation of the satirical news examples posted or questions to clarify the meaning of the examples. While it is best to allow learners to interact freely with their classmates, the teacher can also supply explanations or additional resources when necessary.

#### Suggestions for different proficiency levels

As with verbal irony and memes, satirical news is a form of humor used to mock anything from daily trivial matters to serious contemporary social issues. Teachers can focus on the former when introducing satirical news to lower-proficiency learners. Such satirical items usually use relatively simple vocabulary, and if not, the vocabulary can be simplified. The teacher can also focus on helping lower-level learners notice stylistic hints. For example, satirical news sites are more likely to use features such as all caps in headlines and odd photos that are obviously edited in some way. Meanwhile, teachers can give more-proficient learners freedom in searching for and discussing their own examples of satirical news items. In addition, the teacher can introduce satirical news to explore complex topics, such as politics and media literacy.

## CONCLUSION

Humor is a powerful tool that makes the language-learning experience more interesting, memorable, and engaging. In addition, humor instruction about popular forms of humor in English-speaking cultures can be integrated to supplement any of the traditional four language skills. Moreover, our research demonstrates that training helps learners improve their humor competency regarding satirical news and sarcasm (Prichard and Rucynski 2019, 2020). However, the opening anecdote serves as a warning that humor instruction is not something to randomly tack on merely to

**Our aim in this article is to provide one practical framework for how humor instruction about three common forms of English-language humor can be carried out in the classroom.**

make English classes more interesting. Proper humor instruction involves careful scaffolding, selection of materials and resources, and design of activities.

While a growing number of researchers advocate including a component of humor instruction in the language-teaching curriculum, our aim in this article is to provide one practical framework for how humor instruction about three common forms of English-language humor can be carried out in the classroom. Considering the multifaceted and complex nature of humor, teachers still need to take great care in implementing humor instruction that is appropriate for the proficiency level, curricular needs, cultural background, and language-learning goals of their students. A deeper understanding of the humor of the target culture(s) empowers English language learners as they acquire more competence and confidence in communicating, both face-to-face and digitally, in English.

## REFERENCES


Bell, N. D., and A. Pomerantz. 2016. *Humor in the classroom: A guide for language teachers and educational researchers*. New York: Routledge.

Colston, H. L. 2017. Irony and sarcasm. In *The Routledge handbook of language and humor*, ed. S. Attardo, 234–249. New York: Routledge.

Henderson, S. 2017. Internet memes to learn and practice English. In *New ways in teaching with humor*, ed. J. Rucynski, Jr., 246–248. Alexandria, VA: TESOL Press.

Kim, J., and J. P. Lantolf. 2018. Developing conceptual understanding of sarcasm in L2 English through explicit instruction. *Language Teaching Research* 22 (2): 208–229.

Lems, K. 2013. Laughing all the way: Teaching English using puns. *English Teaching Forum* 51 (1): 26–32.

Ohashi, L. 2017. Sharing laughs and increasing cross-cultural understanding with memes. In *New ways in teaching with humor*, ed. J. Rucynski, Jr., 274–276. Alexandria, VA: TESOL Press.

Pimenova, N. 2020. Reading jokes in English: How English language learners appreciate and comprehend humor. In *Bridging the humor barrier: Humor competency training in English language teaching*, ed. J. Rucynski, Jr. and C. Prichard, 135–161. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

Prichard, C., and J. Rucynski, Jr. 2019. Second language learners' ability to detect satirical news and the effect of humor competency training. *TESOL Journal* 10 (1): e00366.

———. 2020. Humor competency training for sarcasm and jocularity. In *Bridging the humor barrier: Humor competency training in English language teaching*, ed. J. Rucynski, Jr. and C. Prichard, 165–192. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

Rothermich, K., and M. D. Pell. 2015. Introducing RISC: A new video inventory for testing social perception. *PloS ONE* 10 (7): e0133902.

Rucynski, J., Jr. 2011. Using *The Simpsons* in EFL classes. *English Teaching Forum* 49 (1): 8–17.

Rucynski, J., Jr., and C. Prichard, eds. 2020. *Bridging the humor barrier: Humor competency training in English language teaching*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

Shively, R. L. 2018. *Learning and using conversational humor in a second language during study abroad*. Boston: Walter de Gruyter.

Wulf, D. 2010. A humor competence curriculum. *TESOL Quarterly* 44 (1): 155–169.



**John Rucynski, Jr.** is an associate professor in the Center for Liberal Arts and Language Education at Okayama University in Japan. He has edited two volumes on humor in language education, *New Ways in Teaching with Humor* and (with Caleb Prichard) *Bridging the Humor Barrier: Humor Competency Training in English Language Teaching*.

**Caleb Prichard** is an associate professor at Okayama University in Japan. He has also taught in South Korea and the United States. He co-edited *Bridging the Humor Barrier: Humor Competency Training in English Language Teaching* with John Rucynski, Jr. and has published several articles on humor in second-language education. He has researched reading strategy competency, among other areas.

**LOTTIE BAKER**
United States

# Using Story Retelling Wheels with Young Learners

**"*What was the book about?" "Can you tell me what happened in the story?"* These are questions that I often asked my seven-year-old English learners who were on the cusp of reading and writing in their new language. Occasionally, a student would respond with a detailed account of the events in the story, but more often than not, my questions were met with a shoulder shrug or a blank stare. My students were astute listeners to storybooks—and a few were even capable of reading the books themselves—but nearly all of them struggled to talk about the stories we read.**

As a novice English teacher, I was initially perplexed by my students' challenge to retell stories. In many cases, the story that my students failed to retell was one I had read aloud to them just minutes before. Did they forget the events in the story? Did they not understand the words they had heard or read? Or did they not have the oral English vocabulary to describe the story? Perhaps they were too nervous to speak? I came to realize that the answers to these questions depended on the learner—and on the story we read. I also discovered that with a little scaffolding, my previously silent students transformed into masterful and confident story (re)tellers.

In this article, I present a scaffolding device that I found helpful for my young learners: a *story retelling wheel*, or simply a *story wheel*. This tool can be adapted to meet young learners at different English language and literacy levels. It requires only paper and pencil, making it an ideal resource for classrooms with limited materials. Not only did I use the story wheel with success in my U.S. elementary-school English as a second language (ESL) classroom, but I also shared it with Thai English teachers who taught young learners in Thailand. The story wheel helped their shy students who rarely uttered an English word in class to string together short phrases. Even more exciting was that the students *enjoyed* the process of retelling. A lesson we learned was that we do not need to wait until learners acquire enough English to produce flawless retellings. Instead, imperfect retellings with the support of scaffolding instruments can push learners to develop English and have fun at the same time.

In the next section, I briefly outline the research on the importance of oral story retelling and the benefits of scaffolding for English learners. I then explain procedures for preparing and using the story retelling wheel, offering adaptations for different contexts. I emphasize how the story wheel can be used to expand learners' retelling capacities, as well as to hone critical-thinking skills and to provide oral language practice. I conclude with a summary of practical recommendations for implementing this tool, based on my experiences as a teacher and teacher educator.

**[The story retelling wheel] requires only paper and pencil, making it an ideal resource for classrooms with limited materials.**

## ORAL RETELLING OF STORIES

Oral retelling is a staple instructional activity in early-grade reading classes. And for good reason, too. When eliciting a retelling, a teacher "gains insight into the text [students] have constructed in their mind" (Jennings, Caldwell, and Lerner 2013, 280). Research has long indicated that reading comprehension improves when young learners are asked to retell the stories they read (Dunst, Simkus, and Hamby 2012; Isbell 2002; Morrow 1989). When retelling, learners do not simply repeat the story verbatim, but develop their own version, using original language (Spiro 2007). They revisit the story structure and integrate language from the text into their own speech. Through this process, learners come to a deeper understanding of a story while developing a more robust and expressive vocabulary. For English learners, retelling stories helps connect spoken language to print while boosting oral language development. And strong oral English proficiency has been shown to support English reading and writing skills (August and Shanahan 2006; Shin and Crandall 2014).

Underneath a learner's oral description of a story is a complex process that involves multiple skills (Spiro 2007). To generate a holistic retelling, learners first recall the story from their working memory. They then select the salient parts to tell, while omitting details that they remember but deem nonessential to the plot. Learners integrate key vocabulary and language structures from the story into new phrases and sentences they create in their retelling. They signal the sequence of events to the listener using transition words and phrases (e.g., *first, then, next, at the end*) that may or may not have been present in the story. These cognitive demands grow as the texts gradually increase in complexity and length. And teachers often ask learners to make all of these language choices almost instantaneously, shortly after they close the cover of the book.

Retelling is no small feat when reading in the native language; it is even more challenging in a new language. Because receptive language skills often develop ahead of productive ones, English learners' retelling may not reflect their understanding of the text. That is to say, learners may understand more of the story than they produce in their retelling. They may fixate on a memorable part of the story rather than telling the full story, or they may skip parts that require use of vocabulary that is difficult to pronounce. The retelling that learners produce therefore may not match their internal story reconstruction. These learners may benefit from support to enhance their story retelling capacity.

*Scaffolding* techniques are temporary, targeted support mechanisms for learners to help them succeed in activities that they cannot yet complete independently (Bruner 1983). Scaffolding can bring complex academic tasks within reach for English learners (Gibbons 2015). Retelling is no exception (Hansen 2004; Shin and Crandall 2014). In their review of literature on retelling strategies, Dunst, Simkus,

**Even more exciting was that the students *enjoyed* the process of retelling.**

**The story wheel can be used to expand learners' retelling capacities, as well as to hone critical-thinking skills and to provide oral language practice.**

and Hamby (2012) note three forms of scaffolding for retelling: (1) verbal prompting (e.g., "What happens next?"), (2) visual aids (e.g., sequencing cards), and (3) manipulatives (e.g., props related to the story). The scaffolding tool I describe in this article—a story retelling wheel—most closely fits the form of a visual aid. This tool is versatile and can be used both to provide support and to extend the challenge of retelling.

## STORY RETELLING WHEEL

A story retelling wheel is a circle divided evenly into segments, each of which features an image to represent an event in a story. The wheel is a visual scaffold for students as they retell a story that they heard or one that they read themselves. As students retell a story, they manipulate the wheel, physically rotating it as they talk about each part. Figure 1 illustrates possible templates for a story wheel.

A story wheel is an after-reading instructional strategy, which means the wheel supports tasks that students complete *after* listening to or reading a story. To ensure students understand the story, you might read the story aloud multiple times. Alternatively, students can listen to an audio recording. If possible, engage students in the story by pausing to ask questions throughout the reading (e.g., "What do you predict will come next?" or "Have you ever broken something?" or "Raise your hands if you eat something like porridge at home."). The final section, on implementation tips, offers more advice about read-aloud stories.

The following steps explain the basic procedures for preparing and implementing story wheels for young learners. In subsequent sections, I provide more explanation about ways to implement these steps and adaptations for different contexts.

### Prepare the story wheel

1. Create a story wheel template for your students. Cut a piece of paper into a large circle. Divide the large circle into three to eight equal segments, depending on how many events you want to include. You can create the sections by using a basic compass or simply by folding the circle to form creases. The template should resemble a pie graph, as in Figure 1.

2. Write the title and author of the story on one side of the story wheel. Students can draw and color their own "cover" on this side later. Another option is to draw a small circle in the center of the wheel and write the title in that circle.

3. Identify three to eight important events in the story. In my experience, about six events is generally a good number, but

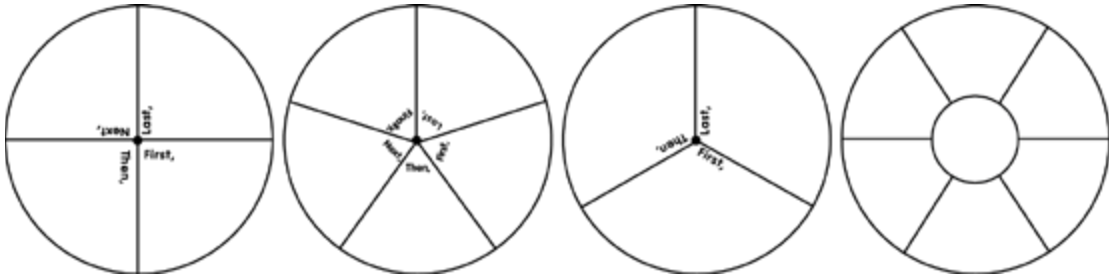


**Figure 1. Possible templates for a story wheel**

**A story retelling wheel is a circle divided evenly into segments, each of which features an image to represent an event in a story.**

learners who are new to this technique or who are beginning speakers may benefit from a simple story with fewer events. More than eight events are too overwhelming for young learners and require too much time to retell; fewer than three events do not capture the arc of a story, which at a minimum consists of a beginning, middle, and end. Indicate the beginning segment with a symbol (e.g., an asterisk or the number 1), or write sequencing words such as *first*, *then*, and *finally* in each section. You might also draw an arrow on the edge to indicate the direction of the events. Figure 1 displays examples of story wheel templates with various events.

4. Draw an image representing the event in each segment, sequenced in chronological order. Consider including key vocabulary, labels for images, or names of characters in the segments. See Figure 2 for an example of a story wheel I used for the story *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. I indicated an asterisk next to the number 1 to make sure students knew where to start retelling.

**Figure 2. Example of a story wheel for *Goldilocks and the Three Bears***

5. If a photocopier is available, make a copy of the story wheel for each student. If a photocopier is not available, then students can take turns using the story wheel in small groups. Other adaptations, described below, are for students to create their own story wheels or for teachers to apply the sequencing concept of the story wheel to separate images hung around the classroom.

### Implement the story wheel

6. After students listen to the story read aloud at least once, model how to use the story wheel. Demonstrate what you would like students to do: retell the story themselves by pointing to each segment as they describe the events in the story. Make sure students understand how each image corresponds to a part in the story. You might revisit the pages in the book and explicitly show students how each part matches with the image. You can also use a *think-aloud* technique in which you verbalize your thoughts before speaking. I provide more details about modeling the process in the next section.

7. Students retell the story using their story wheel. They can retell independently (whispering the story to themselves), together with a partner or small group, or to their family at home. You can also listen to students retell stories individually as a means of assessing their oral language use and listening comprehension.

These basic procedures can be adapted to meet the needs of different student levels. I next provide more information on how to

**Demonstrate what you would like students to do: retell the story themselves by pointing to each segment as they describe the events in the story.**

create and use the story wheel, and I offer some additional recommendations.

## CREATING THE STORY WHEEL

For beginning-level learners who are new to retelling stories, create the story wheel by drawing an image or multiple images in each segment. No artistic skill is necessary; drawings can be basic images or even symbols that remind students of the events in the story. Young learners often enjoy coloring in the drawings later, which allows them to personalize their own wheels. If a photocopier or computer is available, you might consider copying or printing images from the story or locating open-source images or photographs online. But hand-drawn images are as valid as printed ones.

As an adaptation to expand students' engagement with the story, involve students in creating the wheel. Their participation in making the tool will deepen their understanding of the story and increase their cognitive challenge. There are many ways to involve students. The following are three examples of ways students can help create the story wheel, listed in order from less to more student independence.

1. *Students sequence events*. Identify important events and then create each image on small pieces of paper. You might create images on a story wheel, then cut each segment so that they are separate triangles. Students then sequence the images in the correct order. They either attach each image to the corresponding segment on a blank story wheel or piece together the segments like a jigsaw puzzle. This adaptation will help students focus on details as they sequence the events.

2. *Students draw events*. Identify the important events and talk about each one with students. Make sure that students understand which events are important. Then, students create an image for each event. For students new to story wheels, I recommend that you first model this process with the whole class. Consider drawing some of the events yourself as examples to get students started. Then, move through the events one by one to prevent overwhelming students with all the events at once. Older students with computer skills can create digital images using online resources. Transforming a text to a visual representation will help students come to a deeper understanding of the text and allow them to think creatively.

3. *Students identify and draw events*. Students both identify and draw images for the events in the story. This option works best if students are familiar with the concept of the story wheel (e.g., they have already used a story wheel that the teacher created). To introduce this process, conduct a whole-group discussion with students to agree on the most important events. The conversation will engage students in higher-order thinking skills and push them to use academic language. They analyze the text and then justify their opinions for the events they think count as the most important for the story wheel. Once the class has agreed on the important events, students work independently or in small groups to draw an image that represents each event inside the blank segments. As learners grow more proficient at retelling stories, they can identify the events in small groups or independently.

**As with any good instructional scaffold, the wheel enables students to expand their language and move towards independence.**

These adaptations can be combined as well. Students can draw the events, and then later cut them out and practice sequencing them in chronological order. In all cases, it is important that the teacher review students' work before they use the wheel to ensure it accurately represents the story. If students are involved in creating the story wheel, they will have more ownership in the process because the finished product will be their own creation. Further, students who are familiar with creating story wheels can transfer the concept to their own writing. When planning their narrative stories, they can use a story wheel as a prewriting graphic organizer.

## USING THE STORY WHEEL

The real power of the story wheel comes in its use. As with any good instructional scaffold, the wheel enables students to expand their language and move towards independence. The images on the wheel remind students of important events that take place in the story, and the sequential segments provide a tangible structure that helps focus young learners on the task of retelling. Students can create multiple retelling wheels for different stories, and they can use them repeatedly over time to remember their favorite stories. Retelling wheels are most effective, however, if teachers provide students with clear, explicit instructions about *how* to use the tool.

When first introducing a story retelling wheel to students, model how to use the tool. You can do this through a think-aloud technique in which you verbally describe your mental decisions. For instance, you might point to the first segment of the story wheel and say:

> I am going to start on this part because there is a number 1. I see a picture of the three bears all together. This reminds me of the beginning when they decided to leave their house and take a walk.

Young learners may benefit from chorally repeating phrases or vocabulary from the story that you model. By repeating the phrases together as a whole group, students build confidence to say the new phrases independently.

As you introduce the retelling wheel, gradually release responsibility to your students. After demonstrating how to retell the first two or three events on the wheel, call on different students to try retelling the next segments. As students retell the events, offer immediate support and feedback. You might point to images in the story wheel and prompt students with questions such as, "Why is this chair broken? What happened?" You can also use the story wheel to elicit specific language from students, as in the following example:

> "You said Goldilocks took the soup. I understand what you mean, but remember how the author used the word sipped because Goldilocks ate just a little bit? Can you tell me how Goldilocks sipped the soup?"

Once students understand how to use the story wheel, they can practice retelling with each other. To encourage collaboration, teachers can form groups of three or four students. Each group retells the story together, with students taking turns telling the different parts or representing different characters. More beginning-level students can benefit from their peers who jump in with needed vocabulary or guide new learners through the process. Small groups work well for large class sizes because all students can speak simultaneously. The teacher moves from group to group in order to monitor, give

feedback, and make informal assessments on how students are using the wheel. As students become more familiar with the story, they can add movement and even transform the retelling into a dramatic performance.

In my classroom, we created a growing collection of story retelling wheels after reading books out loud. Using the story wheels became an optional anchor activity; if students completed their work and needed a task to "anchor" them to English literacy, they could choose to retell one of their favorite stories. I taught my learners to whisper to themselves to avoid disrupting other students. If you have space in your classroom, you can dedicate a small corner to reading and retelling. You can keep the retelling wheels there, along with books and other scaffolding devices you may use for retelling stories.

The story wheel can also extend English language use beyond the classroom. In places where English is not widely spoken, ensuring young learners practice English outside school is difficult. Even in communities where English is spoken, learners rarely encounter the kind of academic language they hear in books read aloud at home. For young learners, this academic language consists of the stories they hear in books at school. Story wheels encourage students to retell stories to their families using the same vocabulary and language structures in the book. I sometimes give the story wheel as a homework assignment and ask students to retell the story to at least one person in their family. They then report the next day to whom they retold the story. The story wheel is a way for students to share their new language with their family members. Many of my students' families did not understand English, but the images on the wheel allowed students to "teach" their families new words. Through this process, my students made connections between English and their home language.

A question I have received from teachers in the past is, "How can I monitor all the students at once?" Another is, "What if the students aren't using correct English?"

A small class size or a one-on-one tutoring setting allows you to observe students individually and provide immediate feedback. However, this is not possible with large classes, which is often the norm when teaching English. The goal of the retelling wheel is *not* to produce perfect, error-free retellings. Rather, the wheel is a guide that helps students focus on the story language by supporting them in recalling the basic structure and plot. Imperfect oral language use is beneficial and leads to increased confidence and fluency. In fact, by practicing with the retelling wheel away from a teacher's watchful eye, students may feel less self-conscious and more willing to try out new words or phrases in speech.

## ADAPTATIONS

The concept of the story wheel is easily transferred to other after-reading instructional strategies that help learners retell stories. In the hands of a creative, resourceful teacher, the number of adaptations for a story retelling wheel is immense. Here, I offer a few examples of adaptations specifically for beginners and older learners, as well as for learners in classrooms with limited resources.

*Adaptations for beginners*. Story wheels can be used as a scaffold to help beginners retell a story using isolated words or phrases. As with other oral language activities, you would not expect beginner speakers to match the language ability of their more-advanced peers. As the teacher, select target words for students to practice. Strategically draw (or print) images that represent these words. Beginners could be challenged simply to name images in each segment using one- or two-word utterances (e.g., "chair" or "broken chair"). They can also develop fluency using idiomatic phrases from the story (e.g., "just right" and "fast asleep") or language unique to storytelling, such as, "Once upon a time . . . ." You can teach students to use transitional terms such as *and then* and *next* as they move between the story wheel segments. Some teachers may want to allow beginners to use their first language to supplement their story

retelling while pushing them to use English for key words or phrases. As students develop English, their story retellings consist of more English.

*Adaptations for older learners*. An adaptation for older students who can read and write independently entails swapping images for key words or phrases. The brief text serves as a mnemonic, or memory device, for students as they retell the story. As with the pictures on the story wheel, the words can be selected by the teacher or the students. Students can be challenged to first identify the main events in the text and then create symbols or phrases that are meaningful to them. This process also helps students hone the learning strategy of creating and using mnemonics, which can be generalized to other content areas. Alternatively, students can write a phrase or sentence to describe each image. I found this strategy to be a helpful first step for students learning to write summaries of narrative texts.

Another adaptation of the story wheel for older students is the graphic organizer "Somebody–Wanted–But–So–Then," developed by Macon, Bewell, and Vogt (1991). This graphic organizer continues to be widely used in English reading classrooms. Unlike the story wheel, this graphic organizer does not require drawing images. Instead, simply write each of the five words on a segment on the story wheel. Students name the main character (*somebody*), his or her motivation (*wanted*), the problem (*but*), the attempt to solve the problem (*so*), and the final resolution (*then*). These words provide students with the language to narrate a story structure. They could be accompanied by basic images associated with the story, created either by you, the teacher, or by students. As students become more independent in their language skills, they will need fewer images and may simply use the five words to help them structure their retelling. This organizer works best for stories that explicitly follow a "Somebody–Wanted–But–So–Then" story structure. Narratives that are more complex may have multiple characters, motivations, and problems, which might result in multiple "somebodies" or "buts," for example.

*Adaptations for limited supplies*. Not all teachers have easy access to scissors. Fortunately, the concept of the story wheel does not depend on the circular shape! While the distinctive wheel shape helped my learners locate their story wheels among papers, the circle was not necessary to support the retelling. The scaffolding function of a retelling wheel can also be effective on a standard-sized 8.5-inch x 11-inch piece of paper, which is necessary if scissors are not available. Instead of dividing a circle into pie pieces, students can fold a piece of paper into segments of equal size—fold the paper in thirds, as if fitting a letter in an envelope, and then fold once more to create six rectangular segments. Students then draw an image of the story sequence in each segment, beginning with the top segment. When retelling, students can refold the piece of paper and then gradually unfold after describing each event of the story. There are numerous other ways to fold paper to support student learning. Educators have developed creative applications called *foldables* that can be applied to retelling scaffolds (see Dinah.com 2021).

Another barrier is lack of access to a photocopier. Drawing separate story wheels for each student is a time-consuming task that is not reasonable for most teachers, particularly for teachers with large classes. A variation is to transform the story wheel to a class-wide story walk. Create one image of each event on a separate piece of paper. If you identify six main events, use six pieces of paper. Each piece would feature a distinct image that represents an event in the story. Then, attach the images to the walls of the classroom, establishing a station for each picture. Students retell the story by walking around the room. When they reach an image, they describe the part of the story represented on the image. Students can do this process either individually or in groups. To manage this activity, set a time limit for each station, for example, three minutes. When time is called, students rotate to another station. If

**Student interaction during the read-aloud will facilitate students' comprehension of the story, which is necessary for a successful retelling.**

students have extra time at their station, they can talk about their response to the event by answering questions like, "How did you feel when you read this part?" and "How is this part the same as something in your life?"

An advantage to this adaptation is that teachers can include any number of story events without having to cut or fold paper. If the classroom space is large enough, this adaptation also allows multiple story retellings simultaneously, which can help students review stories they have read recently. To do this, create events for three different stories. Hang each group of events in different parts of the classroom. Assign student groups to different stories and instruct them to retell the events in the story to each other. Make sure students use quiet voices and that they have enough space to move around. An additional benefit to the story-walk adaptation is that this technique gets students out of their seats and moving.

## PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

The following practical recommendations for using the story retelling wheel reflect successes and problems that I encountered, either as a teacher for young learners or as a teacher educator for new teachers.

1. *Read the story interactively with students*. The first step in the retelling procedure is for young learners to listen to a story read aloud, either by the teacher or on an audio recording. Student interaction during the read-aloud will facilitate students' comprehension of the story, which is necessary for a successful retelling. Before beginning a read-aloud of a new book, preview the text to students to identify parts that may be unclear. If you are reading the story aloud, you might also practice reading the text aloud to be sure that you are confident with the language in the book. Engage students in the story as you read: ask questions throughout the book (e.g., "What do you think will happen next?"); draw students' attention to illustrations (e.g., "Look at this illustration. What do you think is happening?"); clarify new vocabulary (e.g., "This is a new word for us. It means … ."); and connect the story to topics that are familiar to students (e.g., "Can you tell me about a time when you felt like this?"). When I was reading new books, I wrote questions on sticky notes that I placed on the edges of the pages. As I read aloud in the classroom, these sticky notes reminded me to pause and engage my students. It can be helpful for students to listen to the story multiple times.

2. *Select the right texts to retell*. The retelling wheel is designed to graphically show events in a sequence. Fiction genres and narrative nonfiction genres work best for retelling wheels. Texts should have a clear chronology with one or more main characters. Summarizing informational texts requires different language forms because these texts are organized differently. For instance, students might describe the main idea of a text rather than explain events that occurred at the beginning, later, and at the end.

   An additional consideration when selecting texts is the sophistication of the storyline. Most young learners are emergent or beginning readers, which means they cannot decode texts beyond those with controlled vocabulary, short phrases, and simple storylines. These texts usually do not have a robust story

**In scaffolding frameworks, teachers gradually release responsibility to students. That is to say, classroom activities move from teacher-directed to student-centered.**

structure with a problem and solution. However, because young learners can usually comprehend more English than they can read, they are able to understand more-complex picture books that they hear read aloud, particularly when they ask and answer questions throughout the reading.

A final consideration is to ensure that students have enough background knowledge to understand the story. Consider pre-teaching the main concepts or vocabulary in the story if students do not encounter them in their everyday life. Make connections between the story plot and students' experiences. Avoid stories that are not culturally appropriate for your students. The sample story I showed from my U.S. classroom, for example, may not be a good fit for your classroom.

3. *Model the process of using the story wheel*. In scaffolding frameworks, teachers gradually release responsibility to students. That is to say, classroom activities move from teacher-directed to student-centered. When introducing the story wheel for the first time, show students exactly the language and behavior you expect. If you ask students to create their own wheels by listing the important events, then you should demonstrate to students how to select events that are important. If you ask students to retell for the first time, then give an example of retelling using the wheel. As much as possible, after modeling, observe students closely as they use the wheel. This will allow you to clarify major inaccuracies. However, as with all English language activities, do not expect perfection in language use.

4. *Use the wheel to retell*. I have witnessed primary teachers who limit the use of retelling wheels to a coloring exercise. While coloring can be a creative and enjoyable task for young learners, it does not tap into the potential power the retelling wheel holds in supporting students' oral language. Similarly, I have seen teachers who ask their students to sequence events in the wheel and then submit the wheel to the teacher. Students in these classes never had the opportunity to use the wheel for retelling. Provide time or space for students to retell using the wheel. Students may benefit from an explanation of the purpose of the story wheel. Tell them why you want them to use the story wheel and how it will help them improve. For the retelling wheel to have maximum benefits, students need to use the wheel to guide the retelling process.

5. *Teach transition language*. One of the benefits of the story retelling wheel is that students have an opportunity to practice academic language associated with narrative and fiction. While each story will have specific vocabulary and language structures, general terms will cross stories and enable students to string together sequences. Examples are *in the beginning, first, next, so then,* and *finally*. Teach these terms explicitly and remind students to use them in their retelling.

6. *Remove the story wheel … eventually*. Removing the story wheel may seem counterintuitive, particularly after I just highlighted all the benefits of using a story wheel. However, at its crux, the story wheel is a scaffolding tool.

As with brick-and-mortar buildings, all successful learners eventually shed the scaffolds that helped develop their skills. If you notice that students can retell a story confidently and clearly without an organizer, then they may not need the support of a story wheel *for that book*. However, they may benefit from a story wheel, or a similar retelling graphic organizer, when retelling a more complex story. As students develop English literacy skills, they will move from relying on detailed images to using words and phrases. The variations of story retelling wheels are numerous; the key is to be flexible in how and when students use them.

## CONCLUSION

I originally designed and used the story retelling wheel for young English learners who were just beginning to develop reading skills. But the underlying concept of the story wheel is relevant to anyone who retells stories, which is all of us! I recently had a conversation that reminded me of the value of the story wheel. A friend was planning a weekend trip to a city that I had visited in the previous year. She asked me a question similar to the ones I asked my young learners: "Tell me about your trip. What happened there?" My initial response was something like, "It was so great. I loved it!"; however, that was not an accurate response to her question. Then, I opened my camera to show her photos I had taken. I found that the photos reminded me of chronological details in the trip that I missed in my first retelling from memory. Telling about a trip is certainly not the same as retelling a written story; it lacks the story structure that is commonly found in narrative genres. However, my photos worked as a helpful scaffold similar to the way a story wheel works as a scaffold for students.

This anecdote is a good reminder of how much we are asking of our students when we request for them to "tell what happened" in a book. For our students, not only are we asking them to retell a story, but we are also asking them to do so in English, a language that is not their first. The story wheel is one way to help them find success in retelling, while enhancing their oral language and critical-thinking skills at the same time.

## REFERENCES


August, D., and T. Shanahan, eds. 2006. *Developing literacy in second-language learners: Report of the National Literacy Panel on language-minority children and youth*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Bruner, J. 1983. *Child's talk: Learning to use language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dinah.com. 2021. "Graphic Organizers And Foldables." Accessed March 12, 2021. https://dinah.com/graphic-organizers-and-foldables/

Dunst, C. J., A. Simkus, and D. W. Hamby. 2012. Children's story retelling as a literacy and language enhancement strategy. *CELLreviews* 5 (2): 1–14.

Gibbons, P. 2015. *Scaffolding language, scaffolding learning: Teaching English language learners in the mainstream classroom*. 2nd ed. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Hansen, J. 2004. *"Tell me a story": Developmentally appropriate retelling strategies*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Isbell, R. T. 2002. Telling and retelling stories: Learning language and literacy. *Young Children* 57 (2): 26–30.

Jennings, J. H., J. S. Caldwell, and J. W. Lerner. 2013. *Reading problems: Assessment and teaching strategies*. 7th ed. Boston: Pearson.

Macon, J. M., D. Bewell, and M. Vogt. 1991. *Responses to literature: Grades K–8*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Morrow, L. M. 1989. Using story retelling to develop comprehension. In *Children's comprehension of text: Research into practice*, ed. K. D. Muth, 37–58. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Shin, J. K., and J. Crandall. 2014. *Teaching young learners English: From theory to practice*. Boston: National Geographic Learning.

Spiro, J. 2007. *Storybuilding*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.



**Lottie Baker, EdD**, is a Regional English Language Officer based in Washington, D.C. She has experience teaching English at all levels and has trained teachers in the United States and internationally. Her research interests are content-based instruction, teacher education, and teaching young learners. Lottie began her career as an elementary school teacher.

# READER'S GUIDE

**This guide is designed to enrich your reading of the articles in this issue. You may choose to read them on your own, taking notes or jotting down answers to the discussion questions below. Or you may use the guide to explore the articles with colleagues.**

For example, many teachers discuss *Forum* at regularly scheduled meetings with department colleagues and members of teachers' groups, or in teacher-training courses and workshops. Often, teachers choose an article for their group to read before the meeting or class, then discuss that article when they meet. Teachers have found it helpful to take notes on articles or write a response to an article and bring that response to share in a discussion group. Another idea is for teachers to try a selected activity or technique described in one of the articles, then report back to the group on their experiences and discuss positives, negatives, and possible adaptations for their teaching context.

## Implementing Humor Instruction into English Language Teaching (Pages 2–13)

### Pre-Reading

1. Do you use humor in your teaching? If so, how do you use it—what are your purposes for using humor? What kind(s) of humor do you use?
2. Do you think that humor has a useful function in language teaching? What are possible benefits to including humor in language teaching? What are possible drawbacks?
3. Notice that the title says "humor instruction"—not just humor, but humor *instruction*. What does "humor instruction" mean to you?
4. What types of humor can you think of? Which, if any, should students in your English language classes learn about? Why?

### Post-Reading

1. The article distinguishes between teaching *with* humor and teaching *about* humor. How are they different?
2. Have you ever used humor in your class, only to realize that the students did not find it funny? What did you do? Did you try to explain the intended humor? After reading this article, can you analyze why the humor fell flat, as one of the authors does in the introduction?
3. The authors focus on three types of humor and offer multiple ideas for teaching about those types. Do you think your students are familiar with those types of humor already? (How could you find out?)
4. Which of the three types of humor would fit best in any of the courses you teach? To determine which type, you might want to reread the three questions at the end of the section called "A Framework for Including Humor Instruction in Language Teaching." For each type of humor, can you answer "Yes" to the questions?
5. As you were reading about the three types of humor in the article, including the examples given, how did you feel? Did you understand the humor? Did you laugh—or chuckle, or just smile—often while reading this article? Why or why not?

6. Start keeping a "humor journal." Jot down things that you find humorous—jokes, funny things you hear or think, something funny you see, etc. Try to understand why you find these things humorous. Do any of the funny things match any of the types of humor described in the article? How can keeping a humor journal support any humor instruction you might do?

## Using Story Retelling Wheels with Young Learners (Pages 14–24)

### Pre-Reading

1. What comes to your mind when you see the words "story retelling"? What language skills are involved? Are other skills involved, too?
2. What do you think a "story retelling wheel" is? Describe what kind of wheel you imagine. How might it be used for story retelling?
3. Do you often use stories in your teaching? How do you use them? What do you ask your learners to do after they have heard a story? What techniques do you use to check for their comprehension of the story?
4. What challenges do your young learners have when telling or retelling stories? How do you typically help them overcome these challenges and strengthen their skills?
5. Do you think the ability to retell a story is important for young learners? Why or why not?

### Post-Reading

1. What do you think about story retelling wheels? Do you like the idea? How likely are you to use them with your students? If you don't think you will use them—why not?
2. Pick out a story that you use with your students. Can you break it down into separate events (no more than eight, and preferably fewer, as the author suggests)? How easy is that to do?
3. Of the stories you read with your students, which one would be the best to use retelling wheels with first? What makes that story a good one to start with?
4. The author emphasizes that it is important to model how to use the wheel for retelling. Make a wheel for a story you use in your teaching, and practice retelling the story by using the wheel. (Or use the wheel shown in Figure 2.) What do you learn by doing this? What tips can you pass along to your students while you are modeling the use of the wheel to them?
5. Let your students use a story wheel to retell a story they like. What are the results? Do students speak more than they normally do? Is it fun? Will you do anything different when you use story wheels again?

# A Simple "mmm" Technique to Teach Word Stress and Intonation in English

by ART TSANG

Word stress and intonation are important phonological features of the English language. Many English as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL) learners face difficulties grasping these features, hindering their effective communication in English. ESL/EFL learners are often unaware of word stress, even though it may exist in their first language. When teachers first introduce word stress or correct learners' problems with stress (e.g., /ɪ'steɪt/ versus /'ɪsteɪt/ in *estate* and /'dɪskaʊnt/ versus /dɪs'kaʊnt/ in *discount*), some learners find it difficult to distinguish the differences in stress.

Intonation, meanwhile, is a broader and more complex topic that can go beyond the word level, and it can be one of the most difficult topics to teach in English pronunciation. Although intonation exists in different languages, it is language-specific. Therefore, regardless of one's first language (whether intonation exists or not), learners may encounter difficulties with English intonation. Swan and Smith (2001) is a reference for understanding specific difficulties learners with different first languages have.

## A POSSIBLE SOLUTION: THE "MMM" TECHNIQUE

Having noted the difficulties faced by EFL learners in my years of teaching English pronunciation, I came up with a way to assist them in learning to (1) distinguish between stressed and unstressed syllables (i.e., awareness and listening) and (2) imitate others' intonation as closely as possible (i.e., speaking). Honing learners' skills in (1) and (2) can produce significant results. First, learners will perhaps make fewer mistakes with word stress. Second, they become better equipped to understand information carried by cues in intonation in spoken English (e.g., what a speaker wants to emphasize). A third result is that learners are able to convey information more effectively by using appropriate intonation in English.

This article describes a simple method to teach pitch, a feature common to both word stress and intonation. The technique can be used by native and nonnative

**The technique can be used by native and nonnative English-speaking teachers and is applicable to students of different levels and language backgrounds.**

**In this simple "mmm" technique, all one has to do is transform all the sounds—in a word or a sentence—into /m/.**

English-speaking teachers and is applicable to students of different levels and language backgrounds.

Pronounced as /m/, "mmm" is a sound that should be easy for speakers of any background to produce. Phonetically known as a voiced bilabial nasal, /m/ is produced by closing the lips. It appears in words such as *mum* (at both the beginning and the end) and is used as an interjection, as in, "Mmm, I see what you mean."

In this simple "mmm" technique, all one has to do is transform all the sounds—in a word or a sentence—into /m/. By turning everything into /m/, learners will find it much easier to tell a higher pitch from a lower one and to imitate intonation patterns. This is because learners need not invest mental resources on other linguistic aspects such as pronunciation (i.e., other sounds) and vocabulary; they simply need to utter the sound /m/, which requires little effort. Psychologically, students will also feel less embarrassed and anxious as they might when asked to repeat certain words or sentences; this is because everyone is saying /m/, and pronunciation is not a problem.

To make it easier for learners to understand the technique, I usually challenge them to say the target word or sentence without opening their mouth, which results in all the /m/ sounds. The following are the specific steps teachers can follow and adapt. Examples are also provided.

## THE STEPS OF THE "MMM" TECHNIQUE

1. Start easy with two-syllable words familiar to all the learners. Write the words out (see the left column of the chart in Figure 1) and ask learners to enunciate them. The phonetic symbols in the chart are for teachers' reference only; it is not necessary for the learners to know them.

2. Ask learners to pronounce these words with their mouths closed. The word *happy* should now sound exactly the same as *after* (i.e., two /m/, with the first at a higher pitch). Likewise, *ago* and *balloon* should sound the same (i.e., two /m/, with the second at a higher pitch). Challenge learners to come up with an explanation for this and to provide more examples in both categories.

   The explanation can be found in the second column in Figure 1, with the capital *M* referring to a syllable with a higher pitch and the lowercase *m* indicating a syllable with a lower pitch. (Note that this is not conventional; I have created this for pedagogical purposes.) It is important to point out that in English,

| Target word | The "mmm" | Transcription |
|---|---|---|
| **happy** | Mm | ˈhæpi |
| **ago** | mM | əˈgəʊ |
| **after** | Mm | ˈɑːftə |
| **balloon** | mM | bəˈluːn |

**Figure 1. Examples of target words with the "mmm" technique applied**

| Target word | Common stress misplacement | Correct stress placement | The "mmm" | Transcription |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **triangle** | tri'angle | 'triangle | Mm | 'traɪæŋgl |
| **European** | Eu'ropean | Euro'pean | mmMm* | ˌjʊərə'piːən |

**Figure 2. The "mmm" technique as it is used with three- and four-syllable words**

there is a stressed syllable in each word that has two syllables or more. Therefore, only two stress patterns are possible when pronouncing a two-syllable word: either *Mm* or *mM*. Teachers can also use arrows (↗ and ↘) and gestures (putting one hand up or down) to help students grasp these concepts.

Other two-syllable words stressed on the first syllable include *'answer, 'enter, 'Jason*, and *'lovely*. Two-syllable words stressed on the second syllable include *a'fraid, pro'mote, pro'vide,* and *se'lect*.

**3.** Try words with more syllables and words whose stress placements are often challenging for your learners. You might pronounce these words yourself or play them for learners using online/audio dictionaries, and ask the students to "mmm" the words for you. Then discuss where the stresses are or what the common errors are. Figure 2 shows examples of two words that learners in my context often find challenging. (*Note that strictly speaking, the pitch of the first and second *m* in *European*—known as secondary stress—has a slightly different pitch from the last *m*.)

**4.** When students have mastered the "mmm" technique for multisyllabic words, try it with phrases and sentences. You can make use of many online resources (e.g., YouTube videos), play the target items several times, and work out the "mmm" with learners. The "mmm" should sound like a song, with ups and downs. At the phrasal, clausal, and sentential levels, it is necessary to expand the musical scale from two pitches—*M* and *m*—to a wider range by drawing circles within two lines.

An example is, "I don't want that." (See Figure 3.) Note that for pedagogical purposes, the pitch diagram is not precise; for example, it shows approximate pitch levels but does not show rhythm and loudness. Also, unlike word stress, intonation at a phrase or sentence level is less fixed. It is equally common to hear *want* having the highest pitch in this example sentence. What is important here is that learners are aware of the existence of different pitch levels and patterns, understand their implications, and use them to communicate more effectively.

If you prefer, you can first ask learners to say the target items before demonstrating these items yourself or with audiovisuals. You can follow that with a comparison of the two versions, with the help of "mmm." Once students get the pitch of a target item right, ask them to repeat it several times. It is important to start with simpler and shorter sentences here.

**When students have mastered the "mmm" technique for multisyllabic words, try it with phrases and sentences.**

**The use of just /m/ … is conducive to learners' concentration on the target topic (e.g., loudness, length) rather than on other issues, such as vocabulary and pronunciation.**

An example is, "These aren't real frogs, are they?" (This was spoken by Harry Potter on the train near the beginning of the movie *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*.) Although many intermediate and advanced learners are probably already aware of the rise in intonation in the question tag "are they," many may not be aware that in this question, *frogs* has a lower pitch. Learners will likely be able to demonstrate this pitch if they "mmm" the sentence with you. You can follow up by explaining why certain words are stressed and others are not.

It is worthwhile for both teachers and learners to pay close attention to word stress and intonation while watching movies or video clips. They can select examples to share with the class and practice with the "mmm" technique.

Multiple opportunities for practice with "mmm" may be necessary, especially in the beginning when learners are being introduced to pitch. You can choose target items specifically addressing the challenges learners have. To maximize the benefits, teachers should capitalize on this "mmm" technique to improve learners' sensitivity towards the use of pitch in English, which in turn should improve their pronunciation, listening, and overall speaking skills.

## WHAT'S NEXT?

After using the "mmm" technique with pitch, teachers can try it with other phonological aspects. For instance, loudness can be distinguished by a louder /m/ and a softer /m/; length, meanwhile, can be distinguished by a longer /m/ and a shorter /m/. The use of just /m/, as mentioned, is conducive to learners' concentration on the target topic (e.g., loudness, length) rather than on other issues, such as vocabulary and pronunciation.

## REFERENCE

Swan, M., and B. Smith, eds. 2001. *Learner English: A teacher's guide to interference and other problems*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

**Art Tsang** has taught EFL for more than ten years. He is currently an English teacher educator in the Faculty of Education at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. He specializes in researching and teaching listening, speaking, and pronunciation.

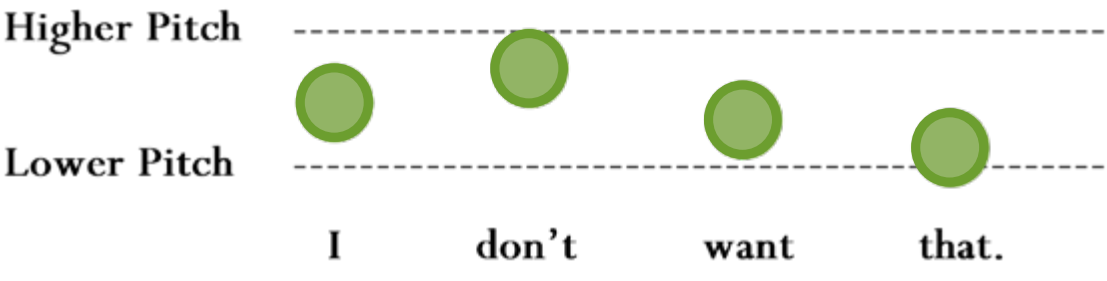


**Figure 3. A pitch diagram for the sentence "I don't want that."**

# Developing Discussion and Tutorial Leadership Skills in EFL Students

by MICHAEL GUEST

Imagine an English as a foreign language (EFL) course that combines all of the following merits:

1. It encourages both learner autonomy and creativity.
2. It allows for extensive spoken interactions between students.
3. It allows students to learn and teach about their own particular interests.
4. It involves all class members on all occasions.
5. It supports learners' cognitive development.
6. It aids in expanding both vocabulary and knowledge.
7. It helps to inculcate a valuable social-discourse skill.

Now, imagine such a course with the added feature that it demands relatively little teacher input or direct teacher control. Does it sound like a dream class? In my own case, in over 30 years of teaching EFL, it is likely the most successful and popular course that I have ever taught. It is an elective class called Student-Led English Tutorials.

Student-Led English Tutorials is a course in which students take turns in developing and then leading and managing small-group discussions on topics dear to the leaders and/or academically relevant to the class members. Students also learn to become active discussion participants. In this article, I explain the practice in detail, discuss teacher and student roles, and offer suggestions for making the tutorials productive for all participants.

While many English teachers incorporate English presentation skills into their curricula, the increasingly valuable skill of developing and managing a small-group discussion (or an interactive tutorial) is often overlooked, despite its prevalence in many professional and academic settings. The ability to discuss a topic of one's own interest, such that it also becomes of interest or value to others, eventually allowing for extended interactions, is an underrated talent. It encompasses the ability to exposit, engage, and (hopefully) stimulate all those participating.

Many teachers will, quite understandably, not be able to devote an entire course to teaching tutorial leadership skills. Near the end of the article, I offer suggestions for adapting the practice to a few classes, as part of a course.

## CLASS STRUCTURE AND MANAGEMENT

First, allow me to explain how the course or class can be arranged before I discuss how the content might be managed. Let's use as a (flexible) model a 14-week semester, 90 minutes per class, with 28 students. With one initial period set aside for a course introduction and orientation, and one at the end of the course for follow-up and evaluation, 12 weeks then remain in which students will actually engage in

**The ability to discuss a topic of one's own interest, such that it also becomes of interest or value to others, eventually allowing for extended interactions, is an underrated talent.**

leading or actively participating in peer-led tutorials.

In a class of 28 students, seven leaders can be designated each week, with the other 21 students then serving as active participants. Under this setup, a full rotation of all students will take four weeks. Over the 12 weeks, each student will thus serve as a leader three times, or once every four weeks, dealing with a new topic each time. On the other nine occasions, they will serve as participants while their classmates serve as leaders.

The 21 non-leader students in each class can be divided into seven participant groups of three members each. During a 90-minute class, these participants will rotate from leader to leader, with each session taking about 15 to 20 minutes to complete. The sessions are held concurrently. Leaders will thus interact with four rotating groups of participants during the same 90-minute class. In other words, the leaders will lead their same tutorial four times in the same class—allowing for opportunities to improve on their initial effort and hone their performance. Participants, on the other hand, will be entertained by four topics and leaders as they rotate from session to session.

## DISCUSSION/TUTORIAL CONTENT

It is the leaders' job to choose a topic on which they will lead a tutorial-type discussion. Leaders are told of their roles at least one class in advance. The scope of the topic they choose should be wide enough to capture the interest of others but not so wide as to state the obvious or cover well-established territory. Those teaching in English for specific purposes (ESP) fields should limit the range of topics to the professional or academic area in which students are studying. Since I teach medical and nursing students, I require that they limit themselves to topics that have at least peripheral medical or healthcare value.

In a recent first-year medical English class in Japan, among the topics my students self-selected were the following: *The Medical Benefits of Laughter, How Right- or Left-handedness is Determined, The Medical Use of Cannabis, Potable Tap Water, Game Addiction, Medicinal Effects of Tea Varieties,* and *Music Therapy*. If the course does not have an ESP focus, any topic that students have interest in and a certain level of knowledge about could serve the purpose, as long as there is novelty value for the participants. In fact, topics that might initially appear as mundane as, say, *How Lava Fields Are Made* or *Why Toiletries Go Out of Fashion* force the leaders to capture the interest of participants in a way that more broadly "popular" topics (*Chinese food*, for example, or *the Olympics*) might end up skirting.

As homework over the week preceding the performance, leaders prepare an outline or introduction of their self-selected topics, often using tablets or other electronic devices/media, whiteboards, handouts, and even hands-on props. I strongly discourage leaders from reading directly from fully prepared scripts during their tutorials. Leaders should prepare to ask questions to, and generate commentary from, participants. This controlled preparation stage allows even the less English-proficient students to acquire greater confidence in their performance.

The purpose of this performance, however, is not merely to serve as a prestige stage for the leaders to expound in English (although the

**It is the leaders' job to choose a topic on which they will lead a tutorial-type discussion.**

ensuing sense of responsibility will generally lead to deeper levels of research and greater care in terms of the final English product). Rather, it is to interact with the participants and stimulate responses from them. The development of these interactive skills is at least as valuable as the development of the tutorial product.

In this way, leading tutorials is quite distinct from giving formal presentations, in which the text is largely a monologue (at least until Q & A). Tutorials, however, are assumed to be more dialogic; that is, participants are encouraged to actively add to the output. The notion of being "participants" thus explicitly distinguishes them from being a member of a passive "audience."

## THE TEACHER'S ROLE

Since the class period revolves almost completely around students leading or participating in the tutorials, the teacher's in-class role is limited largely to that of group creation and movement, monitoring, and time management. On performance day, the teacher should produce a map or list of group members and rotations. Teachers can provide two-minute closing warnings and call time for each session, plus be quick to help jump-start (but then quickly remove themselves from) discussions that have gone quiet or those that are not otherwise engaging all participants. If time remains at the end of the class, the teacher can also review leadership techniques that worked well and call attention to those areas that students might want to reconsider or improve upon.

The teacher should use the introductory class to not only outline the schedule but also to model the skills that it is hoped students will be using when it is their turn to lead. I use the first lesson to conduct a model mini-tutorial on *Red vs. White Wine*, using four or five students as participants, while the other students are encouraged to take notes on leadership techniques that I am employing in order to stimulate discussion and interest.

## GOOD-PRACTICE TIPS AND PERFORMANCE SKILLS

During the initial class meeting, I also distribute, as a handout, a list of 18 "good-practice" tips that students should consider for developing interesting and successful tutorial discussions. After the model mini-tutorial demonstration, I first elicit tips like these from students rather than simply presenting them, before sharing and going over the handout. The tips are as follows:

1. *Choose a topic that you know something about and that you are truly interested in.*
2. *Remember the goal: To make others more interested in and knowledgeable about your topic.*
3. *Don't hand out a paper at the beginning (people will just read it and ignore your speech). Give out any papers in the middle or at the end.*
4. *Choose only a few learning points and focus on something members are unlikely to know.*
5. *Try to find out the participants' familiarity with and knowledge of the topic at the beginning.*
6. *Try to create a personal atmosphere.*
7. *Think carefully about how to open the session—don't start by stating your topic directly.*

8. *Think about how to clearly and effectively close the session. Don't suddenly say, "That's all" or "I'm finished."*

9. *Give participants time to respond (more than just one word). And respond to participants.*

10. *Elicit content from participants (then feel free to add or modify). Don't just* ***tell*** *them things.*

11. *Make sure to include every participant in the discussion.*

12. *Teach only a few new, key vocabulary items when necessary. Also consider whether these have long-term or short-term value.*

13. *Use physical examples or props if possible; make your tutorial visual or tactile if you can.*

14. *Consider including a short quiz, task, and/or summary of key points.*

15. *Don't talk for too long. Allow other members to respond, comment, or do a small activity. Don't read from a script or paper (at least for more than 15 seconds or about 25 words).*

16. *Use a whiteboard or tablet if necessary. If you use a paper handout, bullet or point form is better than paragraph form. Use strong, attractive visuals.*

17. *Do research on your topic so you can be sure about what you are discussing.*

18. *Allow time for questions, feedback, a summary, and comments at the end.*

## EVALUATION AND RELATED CONSIDERATIONS

Teachers are likely to be concerned about how to effectively evaluate students in such a course. It is not the type of course that suits itself to a written exam, so instead I grade students throughout the course, based upon their performances both as leaders and as participants. This involves monitoring all sessions while they are in performance, noting such features as how well the leader has prepared the tutorial, how ably the leader initiates interaction or discussion, whether the content contains novelty, whether the content appears to stir the interest of participants, and whether the language forms (written and spoken) are effective in communicating the content.

To carry this out, I spend my viewing time visiting all leaders on multiple occasions of one to two minutes each (so as not to interrupt the session) and compiling notes regarding strengths, weaknesses, and other relevant points that may warrant further commentary. Feedback based on these observations can be given in the moments between sessions, at the end or beginning of an individual lesson, or in a post-lesson response online. I also schedule a final-class follow-up, outside the regular class time, in which each student is given 12 minutes with me one-on-one in order to convey the following:

- The topics they chose
- Three central thematic points for each of those topics
- What worked or did not work well regarding the discussion of those topics (This can further indicate whether they adjusted or improved their skills over the duration of the course.)
- What they learned from other leaders, including another student's tutorial they found compelling (and why)
- A summarization of my collected notes regarding their performances as leaders and as participants

A mid-program class could also be set aside for peer evaluation, with students providing helpful feedback to one another and self-reflecting upon their performances thus far. In addition to the above, attendance, effort, and active participation form the bulk of the grade.

**Tutorial practice is well suited to virtual teaching … provided that students are familiar with the tools of managing a presentation in the platform they are using.**

There are, of course, certain cautions that the teacher should keep in mind and may have to explicitly convey to the students over the course. Primary among these are the following:

- There should always be some novel content in the tutorial.
- The level of English, as well as the academic level of the content, should be suited to the proficiency levels of their classmates.
- Plagiarism will not be accepted. Quotes from other sources must be cited.
- Taking content from Wikipedia entries alone, as well as using dubious websites, is to be discouraged.
- It is the duty of the participants, not only the leader, to expand or expound upon the topic at hand.
- Formal, conference-style presentations should be discouraged in favour of a more collegial atmosphere.
- Use of the L1 should be included only for single vocabulary items or phrases when the leader wishes to foster a quick grasp of an item or concept among participants.

## TEACHING IN SMALLER OR SINGLE UNITS

A question teachers might have is whether the use of student-led tutorials can be adapted to a single class meeting or just a few class sessions. The answer is yes, especially if the class is relatively small. In a class of 12, for example, all students can prepare a tutorial as a leader, rotating within a group of four students, with each serving as a leader once. This will mean, though, that each student will likely have only one chance to lead his or her session, making detailed preparation that much more important. Unfortunately, managing these types of tutorials in very large classes (over 40 students) can be unwieldy and is not recommended.

However, tutorial practice is well suited to virtual teaching, particularly via platforms such as Zoom with its breakout rooms, provided that students are familiar with the tools of managing a presentation in the platform they are using.

## FINAL WORDS

Student-Led English Tutorials is a joy to teach and, judging by both attendance and feedback over ten years, is my most popular and stimulating class. Indeed, I have learned much myself from the students' tutorials, which are often highly entertaining. More than that, the fact that students are cognitively engaged in articulating and conveying English content that is self- or peer-generated, while also developing practical interactive social skills, means that I can confidently give my recommendation of this practice to any English language teacher worldwide.

**Michael (Mike) Guest** is associate professor of English in the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Miyazaki in Japan, where he has worked for over 20 years.

# Balancing Online Classes, Fun, and Kinesthetic Intelligence for Beginning Learners

**by AHMED MOHAMED GENDY**

When I began teaching young learners online, I thought it would be difficult because I was used to teaching learners who were older and because we were switching to a virtual platform.

As soon as I looked at one of the teachers' guides, I thought it was impossible to carry out some of the steps in a virtual class, and I noticed especially that the lessons were missing a kinesthetic part, which could motivate many students. My class has about 35 students, and they are on their first track of learning English, as it is taught from grade four in Saudi Arabia. They are young learners whose concentration span is not long, and there should be something that can trigger their attention after a while to keep them enthusiastic and support their language acquisition.

I decided to be my own teacher's guide, and I came up with at least three activities that combine language learning, fun, and movement. The concepts are similar in all three activities, but that can be helpful to young learners because they become used to the activities and can then focus on the lesson and the language being taught.

The first activity involves teaching colours. After introducing and teaching the necessary vocabulary, I told students, "Bring something red to the camera." My instruction was in English, and I waited to see whether the children would understand it. As soon as one student brought something red and showed it on the screen, I praised that student to reinforce the concept and motivate others. They started to do what that first student had done. During the activity, students went away searching for colours—things in their homes that were the target colours—and brought a wide variety of items. That led us to introduce more vocabulary, which students were interested in because they were showing the objects or looking at things their classmates were showing.

This is a fairly simple activity that most teachers could use in a virtual format. I suggest that, from time to time, teachers ask students to use the new vocabulary in sentences of their own to enrich their vocabulary and to contextualize language. It is easier to realize the meanings of realia within context. In our case, everyone wanted to show items to me and others in the class. I called this experience "the colours game." Due to the strong motivation that was created, students asked me in each class session whether we would play the colours game.

The second activity is related to teaching shapes. As in the previous activity, I asked students to bring something of a particular shape—diamond or circle or rectangle, for example—and they went off to look for things and came back as fast as possible. Pupils asked, "Do you see my square on the screen?" Some students made shapes with their hands or on paper, which was fantastic. Not only were students learning the vocabulary for shapes, but they were being creative in how they responded.

Also, they were learning to understand and/or to say various expressions, such as "Bring me [something that is blue]" and "Show me [a square]" and "Do/Can you see [my triangle]?" Teachers

might have to teach these expressions to students before starting the activities. That way, there is no need to stop the flow of the activity in order to teach the instructions and expressions.

The third activity involves teaching the question starter, "How many … ?" I asked students to count the doors, windows, and even stairs at home. Then they came to the camera and asked or answered questions starting with "How many … ."

A key factor that enabled me to motivate students was the camera. Whenever I asked students to turn on their camera, it meant that the lesson would be interesting.

Guess what I did if some students didn't have a camera? I asked students who didn't have a camera to bring an item of a certain colour, for instance, and then asked other students to guess the colour they had until I made sure they were fully engaged.

The following is a sample conversation between me and two students; Student A does not have a camera, and Student B has one.

I say to Student A, "Please bring something to the screen."

Student A says, "I have something."

I ask Student B, "What colour does Student A have?" (Or Student A can ask, "What colour do I have?")

Student B says, "Black."

I ask Student A, "Is it black?" (To increase participation, a third student could ask this.)

Student A could say, "Yes, it is" or "No, it isn't." If it is "No," the process can be repeated. Eventually I ask other students to show their black items and ask Student A if his or her item is the same colour as the items on the screen.

This part of the activity has nothing much to do with movement, but I mention it so that teachers who have students with no cameras can benefit.

**This box is made up of rectangles and squares.**

**Green pillows**

One more idea, using the same teaching concept, comes to mind. When we were studying animals, I set up a guessing game. I asked students if they had their cell phones with them. Some of them did. I asked them to find an audio file of an animal and play the audio so that other students could guess which animal it was. Questions had to be in English, such as, "Is it an elephant?" The answer could be, "Yes, it is" or "No, it isn't." Sometimes we could not hear the sounds from the cell phones, so a few creative students and some of those who did not have phones copied animal sounds from other resources and the others had to guess the animals' names. We all enjoyed the lesson. If students have cameras, it is also possible for them to mime animals' shapes and movements so as to reinforce outcomes and have more fun.

It is often easy to think of ways to keep students engaged, but doing so requires good planning and a willingness to enjoy teaching the lesson. In these activities, students turn objects in their homes into resources for learning, and I believe that helps the lessons become meaningful and memorable for them. A student who shows the class a square red pillow, for example, is likely to remember that experience, along with the words *square*, *red*, and *pillow*. Teachers and students can use their creativity to find other ways to bring available realia into the virtual classroom and combine fun, learning, and movement into a memorable lesson for all.

**Ahmed Mohamed Gendy** is an English instructor at Al Dorra Training Institute at Al Sharq schools, Al Khafjy, Saudi Arabia. He previously served as English Central Senior Supervisor in Giza, with the Ministry of Education in Egypt.

# MY CLASSROOM

## ECUADOR (GALÁPAGOS ISLANDS)

**Six hundred miles from mainland Ecuador, in the Pacific Ocean, lies an archipelago of 19 remarkable islands: Las Islas Galápagos. These islands are home to unique species such as marine iguanas, frigate birds, Galápagos sea lions, blue-footed boobies, giant tortoises, and Darwin's finches. They are also home to Sandra Urgilez, an English teacher at San Cristóbal High School (Unidad Educativa Fiscomisional San Cristóbal). Originally from Guayaquil, a coastal city on the Ecuadorian mainland, Sandra has been living and working on San Cristóbal Island for 20 years. Sandra's dedication to her students, passion for her profession, and positive attitude are the building blocks of her teaching philosophy. These traits have kept her going despite the challenges she has faced over the years and especially during the COVID pandemic.**

Photo by Jarom Moscoso

**Sandra Urgilez enjoys a beautiful day in Galápagos at the Muelle de San Cristóbal (San Cristóbal Pier).**


**Sandra at Punta Carola, a white sand beach and popular stomping ground for sea lions and marine iguanas, endemic species to the Galápagos. The Punta Carola lighthouse (and a rainbow) can be seen in the background.**

Many teachers would dream of teaching in the Galápagos. A national park, marine reserve, UNESCO World Heritage Site, and the place that inspired Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, the Galápagos provide a natural canvas for molding the minds of young learners. Sandra is one of the lucky Ecuadorians authorized to legally work in the Galápagos; the islands are protected lands due to their vulnerable and unique situation. While only four of the islands are inhabited by humans, the combined population is around 30,000 and growing at a rate of about 6 percent per year, compared to a slower growth of 2 percent in the Ecuadorian mainland. For many, this increase is concerning and considered an environmental threat. To protect the islands, the government has enforced strict rules regarding who is permitted residency.

Luckily, Sandra obtained her right to reside in the islands two decades ago when Liceo Naval Galápagos, a military school, hired her to teach English. When this school was integrated into the public system, Sandra got a new teaching job at her current school so that she could remain in the Galápagos with her three sons.

While Sandra often misses her days at the naval school, where her classroom had books, a projector, and even air conditioning, teaching in the public system brought new experiences and professional growth. The system "makes it very difficult to fail a student or hold them back," she explains, adding that students sometimes lack motivation. To combat this, Sandra utilizes tools garnered from participating in various professional-development activities. She says, "I had a scholarship for a TESOL training from Experiment in International Living (EIL) Ecuador. There I learned a lot about student-centered teaching. When I use those techniques, I find I get good results. For example, the first day of class I make rules with [students]. I say to them, 'Let's make a list of classroom rules together.' They offer ideas, and I write the rules on a board. That [activity] is very successful for me because when I do that, the students know what the rules are in my class, and they are respectful and responsible."

Sandra's school is the biggest in town, with about 800 students. Her classes usually have 20 to 30 students. Classrooms have a board, desks, tables, and chairs. She brings other resources—books, markers, a laptop, and a speaker—to class in her backpack. Sandra relies on her creativity to engage students, often incorporating movement and a change of learning environment. "When I start to

**Sandra follows a simple philosophy and encourages others to do the same—"First engage them and then start the class."**

teach a class and they are not motivated, I say, 'OK, everybody, stand up! Let's go outside. Run. Let's do some exercises.' [One day] the vice principal [saw us doing exercises and] said to me, 'Hmm. You are very good at exercises. You would make a very good PE teacher,'" she says, chuckling. While Sandra doesn't plan to teach PE (physical education), she knows movement helps her students stay engaged by allowing them to relax and have fun. She explains, "Sometimes when we are outside, I say to my students, 'Start breathing. Inhale. Exhale. Jump!' and they start to whine, 'No, teacher. I'm tired.' I say to them, 'I'm sorry, I don't remember saying, "Run only if you are not tired,"' and they start to laugh. And in that moment, I know that they are engaged." Sandra follows a simple philosophy and encourages others to do the same—"First engage them and then start the class."

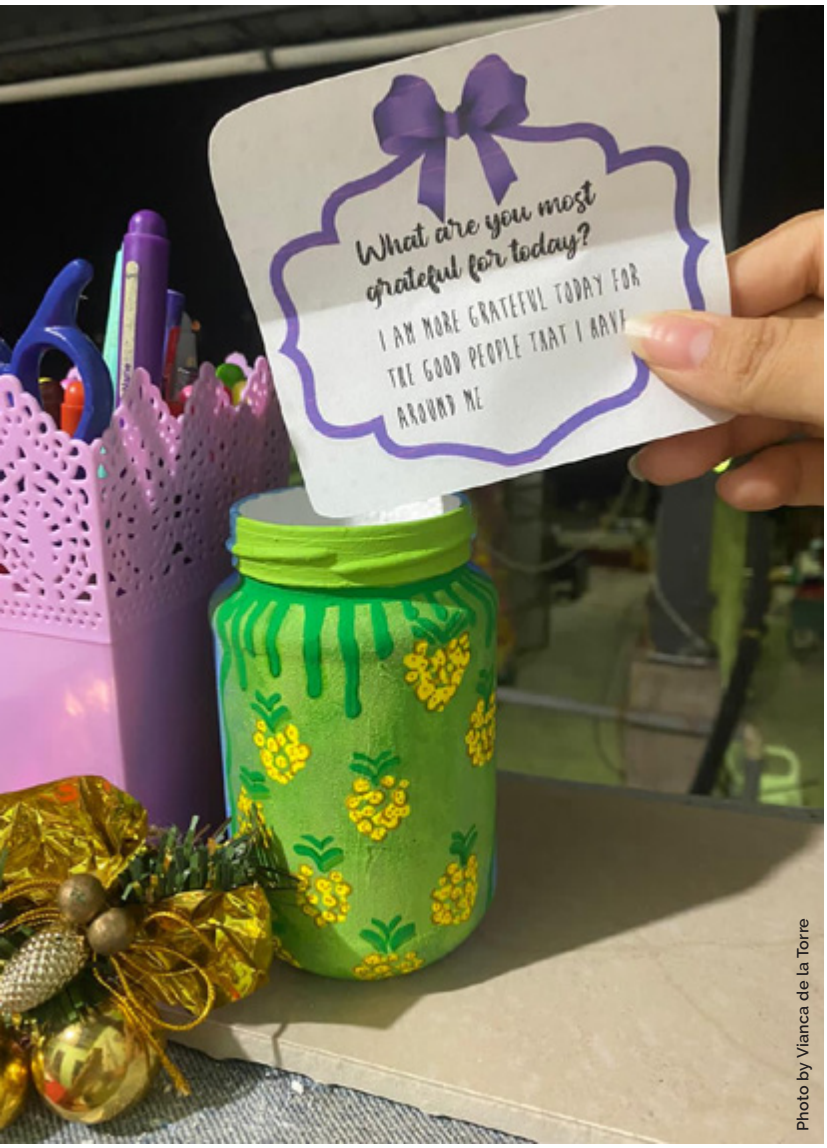


Photo by Vianca de la Torre

**As the pandemic spread, Sandra's students made gratitude jars as a way to stay positive. They decorated the jars and, in English, wrote one thing they were grateful for each day.**

Sandra maintains a positive attitude and notes that she has a special gift: seeing students as individuals. "I remember one trainer, Juan Carlos Hidalgo. One thing I learned from him was the importance of building rapport with students … *Tu tienes que compenetrarte con el alumno and entenderle* [You have to empathize with the student and understand him]. … Try to feel in the same way as them," she says. "When you [empathize], your students are engaged." The idea of building rapport with students resonates with Sandra. "All the time I ask them what they think. And I listen to them. I realize that they really want people to listen," she says.

Student-centered strategies inform Sandra's learning environment. "I don't like to stay all the time in one place," she says. "Before

Here's how to make a gratitude jar:

1. Find a jar (or a ziplock bag can work, too!).
2. Make small slips of paper.
3. Write what you are thankful for on the slips of paper and put them in the jar.
4. Decorate the jar.
5. Every week, add to your gratitude jar.

**"[Students] have to learn because my mindset is that English is a tool for your life. If you speak another language, you have more doors open in your life."**

Photo by Vania Mora

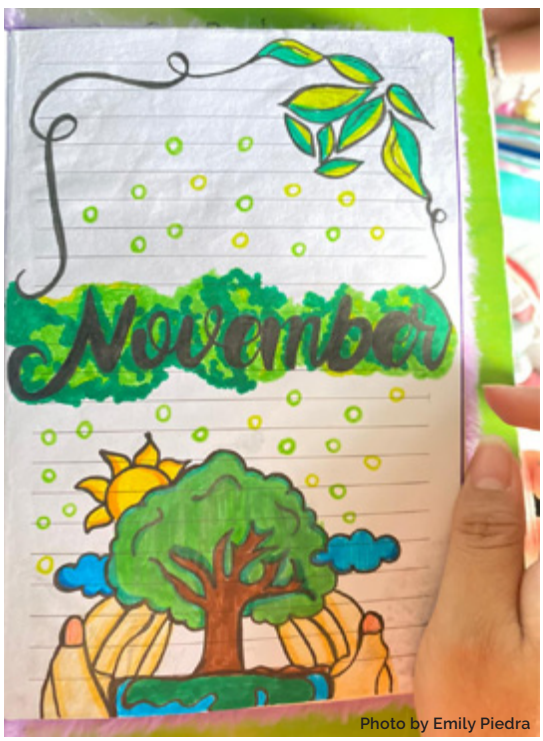

Photo by Emily Piedra

**During the pandemic, Sandra's students began making daily habit journals from recycled materials to practice writing in English and to stay mindful of their physical and emotional health.**

COVID, I would take them outside, walk around with them, or I would separate the desks and we would sit on the floor. Sometimes I would let them lie down and write. I like when they feel comfortable, like a family, because we are a community. The book never says that. But I don't care."

With the onset of the pandemic, Sandra was once again challenged. She says, "My students lost motivation, and many stopped attending classes or sending their assignments. It affected me a lot too. My blood pressure blew up. I felt very bad. But then I thought: I can't change all those things. I can't do that. And I told myself, 'OK, go ahead, Sandra.' Life goes on. … It was very challenging for me also because I'm a teacher that likes her students to actually learn. They have to learn because my mindset is that English is a tool for your life. If you speak another language, you have more doors open in your life."

Sandra teaches approximately 150 students per year and insists they rid themselves of a "*No puedo*" or "I can't" attitude. She also uses her "no excuses" approach with parents she calls or chats with via WhatsApp groups. While many parents don't show interest in their children's education, others are highly engaged. Sandra speaks with some parents as often as twice per week. "I'm strict with both parents and kids," she says. "I like when parents listen to me … and sometimes students change because of it. It's not all the time. But if you have 200 students and you can see the change at least in ten students, you can feel that you won because that group maybe will change the world. So that's my goal."

This past year, during the transition to remote learning, some students shared with Sandra that they felt anxiety and stress. She turned these feelings into a teachable moment

Pre-pandemic: Sandra's students work on a poster for a collaborative English project about "High School News."

Photo by Sandra Urgilez

and an opportunity for self-reflection. Sandra wanted her students to communicate authentically, so she started projects that promoted connection and incorporated social and emotional learning (SEL). SEL helps students apply knowledge to better manage their emotions and understand their feelings and experiences. To help her students do this, Sandra asked them to make "gratitude jars" and keep daily habit journals. These were fun projects that helped her students practice English and provided spaces for them to self-reflect and express their feelings.

Sandra gets inspiration for her lessons from many places. She utilizes the national curriculum, which the Ministry of Education has recently contextualized for the Galápagos, for guidance and structure. While planning lessons, she is mindful of Education for Sustainability (EfS) principles and other techniques that she has learned from the Galápagos Conservancy's Education for Sustainability in Galápagos (ESG) Teacher Professional Development Program. As part of the ESG program, the Galápagos Conservancy organizes bi-annual teacher institutes in collaboration with Ecuador's Ministry of Education, the Fundación Scalesia, and the U.S. Embassy in Quito. Bilingual professional-development specialists from universities, public school districts, and Ecuadorian institutions guide around 375 teachers and 30 school administrators in high-leverage practices, maximized to take advantage of the unique features afforded by

**Teacher-leaders used their knowledge of sustainability goals to organize a lesson on plastics, a beach cleanup field trip, and other sustainability-themed activities.**

**"Students in San Cristóbal receive a free training in conservation from the national park through a program called *Mi Pequeño Guardaparque* [My Little Park Ranger], where they become certified 'park rangers,'" with the knowledge to take care of the environment responsibly.**

Galápagos. During the last institute, teacher-leaders used their knowledge of sustainability goals to organize a lesson on plastics, a beach cleanup field trip, and other sustainability-themed activities. These activities help students connect what they learn with where they live and develop a deeper understanding of sustainability in the Galápagos context.

The Galápagos Islands provide plenty of opportunities to make English lessons interesting; when in need of additional inspiration, Sandra uses art-oriented websites like Pinterest. She says, "I like when the curriculum says, 'Language through the Arts.' I love that part of the curriculum. Ideas come to me about mixing teaching English with art. And my students feel motivated when I apply art with English. At the beginning of the pandemic, I was writing in my journal, 'I'm grateful for … .' And I realized it would be great to do with my students. So I found on Pinterest ways to do the same activity with my students, but also mixed with recycling to reinforce sustainability goals of the Galápagos. I thought it was a great idea to mix gratitude moods with recycling.

"All the time, my students were complaining about COVID, how they couldn't go outside. I told them, 'You have to realize you are very blessed.' So, they had to recycle any jar, plastic or glass, and make cards in English: 'I'm grateful for _____' and why—the reason they are grateful, for 31 days." Reflecting on the project, she says, "It was a beautiful experience for them. Teachers work and work and work and forget to encourage their students. It's important to chat with students to find out how they feel. … I'm a spiritual woman. I think if you're in a gratitude mood, things will be better every single day of your life."

Sandra shares that the challenges with education she has encountered are not unique to the islands. "All over the world, there are dysfunctional families and parents and teachers who disconnect. What we have are global problems," she says. "Regarding teaching, I need more resources. I would like to have a very functional English laboratory with a computer, projector, and speakers because it would help me teach better, especially listening classes, but—every other teacher wants that, too … ." Getting these resources is not a reality for Sandra right now, but she feels lucky to teach in Galápagos: "The people here are special. I like that people in Galápagos are humble. No one thinks he is more important than anyone else. Despite everything, they are humble."

The Galápagos schools offer a special environment to teachers in that they utilize a contextualized curriculum and sustainability goals that provide educators and students with unique opportunities. Sandra explains, "Galapagueñan students have a role to play as residents of Galápagos. Students in San Cristóbal receive a free training in conservation from the national park through a program called *Mi Pequeño Guardaparque* [My Little Park Ranger], where they become certified 'park rangers,'" with the knowledge to take care of the environment responsibly. "My students are always saying to me, '*Yo también soy guardia del parque*' [I'm also a park ranger]. It's a beautiful program."

That "*guardaparque*" [park ranger] identity seeps into Sandra's lessons. She recalls, "We were doing a lesson on sports and what sports they can do in Galápagos. One student said, 'jet ski'—I asked the class, 'Can you jet ski in

**"English teachers are excellent problem solvers. We are creative and energetic, and we help each other. We have to."**

Galápagos?' 'No, teacher, no. It will damage the marine life,' they say. They are very aware of the environment." Sandra is also mindful of sustainability in Galápagos. When students created daily habit journals, she specifically asked them to recycle a notebook. "I [didn't] want them to use a new notebook," she explains. "They use things that they have left over from previous years. And we decorate them with their own designs to make them special."

Sandra didn't always plan to be an English teacher. She says, "I started to study medicine at university, but it was too much time for me. I didn't want to ask for money from my parents. So I changed my career and studied computing. That was my first degree. Programming and computers. One day, an aunt visited my mom and she said to me, 'Are you working right now? I have a friend who wants a computer teacher. And you have a teacher appearance. Go to this address.' And that's all. I got the job, and soon I was studying another degree in teaching. … I like to communicate with people from other countries, and I was always the best student in English. In my school, high school, university. For that reason, I decided to teach English."

The entrance to San Cristóbal High School (Unidad Educativa Fiscomisional San Cristóbal), where Sandra teaches English

Photo by María Belén León

For Sandra, one of the greatest challenges of living in Galápagos is maintaining her residence visa, which is not permanent, even though she is a tenured teacher. "It is very difficult for me because sometimes the government asks for papers that don't exist," she says. "Still, I'm optimistic [about the future of education in my country]." Sandra says that being an English teacher is especially helpful in maintaining a positive attitude: "I think English teachers are excellent problem solvers. We are creative and energetic, and we help each other. We have to." A community of practice of Galápagos English teachers has evolved from the ESG institutes where teachers support one another, nowadays mainly through virtual means. Sandra's school has four English teachers, and Sandra has recently been selected as a *líder pedagógica* [pedagogical leader] and is influential in helping her fellow teachers succeed.

Sometimes Sandra makes jokes with students in her classes who are contemplating their future careers: "'I'm going to give you a curse,' I tell them. 'The curse is that you will become an English teacher!'" She laughs, "But really, I tell them if they want to be a teacher or study something, just do it. You can do it."

This article was written by **Danielle Sclafani**, who was an English Language Fellow in Cuenca, Ecuador, at the Universidad Nacional de Educación (UNAE) in Azogues. She traveled to Galápagos to support teacher-trainers in the Galápagos Conservancy's Education for Sustainability in Galápagos (ESG) Teacher Professional Development Program, which is how she met Sandra. Since then, Danielle has been supporting teachers in the Galápagos as a Virtual English Language Fellow and Virtual English Language Specialist.

# Character Press Conference

by DONISTA SOLIJONOVA

**LEVEL:** Pre-Intermediate to Advanced

**TIME REQUIRED:** About 60 minutes

**GOALS:** To review and recall important character and plot details from a book or short story; to practice asking and answering questions about the reading text; to use appropriate language while playing an assigned role in a mock press conference based on characters from the reading text

**MATERIALS:** A level-appropriate book or short story that will be read outside of class time; pencils or pens; paper; notebooks in which students can write book logs; short review handout (see Step 6 under Preparation); blackboard or whiteboard; chalk or whiteboard markers; a picture of a press conference (if available) showing reporters and speaker(s)

**PREPARATION:**

Prepare for the press conference activity by doing the following:

1. Choose a short story or book from your curriculum or one that is interesting for your learners and ask them to read it individually at home. It should have at least three characters; ideally, the characters will have unique personalities, and it is best if students are surprised by what the characters do in the story so that they will have questions about why the characters behaved in that particular way. If you have several texts available, you might offer the class a choice.

2. Assign your students to write a book log related to what they are reading. The book log will be like a short diary, where learners make entries as they progress through the book or story. They can share their ideas, emotions, and attitudes about certain situations or characters. If students have difficulty choosing what to write about, you can provide them with questions related to the text they are reading. At lower levels, students might simply summarize, but depending on their ability, they should be encouraged to give their feelings, analyze, make predictions, etc. The book logs help students understand the story and characters, and they can use that understanding in the press conference.

3. Prepare small pieces of paper, one for each student in your class. On three of them, write the name of one of the three main characters in the story or book. On the rest, write the word *journalist*. A good size for the press conference is about 15 students: three characters and 12 journalists. If your class is larger than that, you might want to have more than one press conference so that all students have a reasonable chance to participate. It might also be possible to have more than three characters, depending on the story. (Note that students will not know their roles until they pick their pieces of paper randomly.)

**Explain that at a press conference, journalists ask questions to people in order to get information about important news stories and current events.**

4. Roll or fold all the papers and put them inside a box or bag for the learners to choose and determine their roles.

5. Print out or write tabletop name cards for the three main characters in the reading text. Students should be able to read the name cards from all locations in the room.

6. Prepare a short review of the story or book. This review should describe the personalities and possibly some of the actions of the main characters to remind students who the characters are and what they do. If your students are able, you can ask them to prepare this review. One way to do this is to divide the class into groups and ask each group to prepare a review of a different character. Students' work can then be read aloud or posted around the room for everyone to read before the press conference.

**PROCEDURE:**

1. Display a picture of a press conference and ask students to describe what they see. (You should be able to find pictures online.) Write *press conference* on the board. Ask students if they are familiar with press conferences and have them brainstorm descriptions or ideas they might have. If no picture is available, you can explain that at a press conference, journalists ask questions to people in order to get information about important news stories and current events. The journalists take turns asking questions, and they take notes while the questions are being answered. They use these notes to report on the press conference.

2. Tell students that they are going to attend a mock (pretend) press conference with the main characters of the story or book they read. Tell students that some of them will be "journalists," and some will "act" as the main characters, who will answer journalists' questions about the characters' actions and other plot elements.

3. Guide your students through the short review of the story or book (see Step 6 under Preparation) and draw their attention to the three main characters. The aspects that students seem to enjoy discussing most are the characters' personalities and their behavior in certain situations during the story.

4. Remind learners that three of them are going to role-play the main characters and the others are going to be journalists asking questions. Ask them to take a piece of paper from a box or bag and determine their roles for the press conference.

5. When the three students who will act as main characters are determined, ask them to leave the classroom, or, if the room is large, they can move to a corner. Tell these three students that the journalists will be thinking of questions to ask them, so the three "characters" should help one another remember details about their characters and actions.

6. Meanwhile, the journalists gather and prepare questions about the characters they are most interested to find answers for. It is probably a good idea for the journalists to decide who will ask each question so that questions are not repeated and everyone has a chance to ask at least one question during the press conference.

   Tell journalists to ask questions requiring detailed answers (open-ended questions)

**Journalists start posing questions, one at a time, and the main characters respond to them as if they were the real characters from the book or story.**

rather than questions requiring only "Yes" or "No" answers. Open-ended questions might ask characters about their feelings at certain parts of the story and their reasons for doing things they did. Examples include the structures "How did you feel when … ?" and "Why did you decide to … ?"

Note that if the three main characters are in a corner of the classroom, they should not hear the questions that the journalists are preparing.

7. Steps 5 and 6 usually take about 15 minutes. During this time, you can prepare a table or three desks at the front of the room, where the characters will sit during the press conference. Place the name cards for the characters on the table or desks.

8. Invite the main characters back into the room (or come back from the corner of the room) to take their places at the desks or table at the front of the room. Ask the journalists to sit facing the three characters and prepare to ask questions.

9. Tell the students acting as characters that the journalists will begin asking them questions. They should do their best to answer the questions as completely as they can and not simply give "Yes" or "No" answers.

10. Journalists start posing questions, one at a time, and the main characters respond to them as if they were the real characters from the book or story. For example, they can use the first person "I" when talking about their character's actions or behavior. While the characters answer, all journalists should listen and take notes. Journalists should try not to ask a question that someone else has already asked.

11. During the press conference, quietly observe from the side or back of the room. Offer support as needed. Make notes about student participation and performance in the press conference. You may want to note down questions or language topics to discuss with the class after the activity. Make sure to use positive reinforcement of things that were expressed well.

12. Make sure all journalists have a chance to ask questions. If time allows, you can continue the activity until there are no more questions.

## EXTENSIONS

1. Have students write a report on the information they have received from the main characters and publish it as a news article. If there is a school newspaper or class blog, students can write the articles in groups, with each group focused on a specific character. If there is no newspaper or blog, students can write articles individually to exchange or hand in.

2. Have students discuss what went well during the press conference, what responses they liked most, and what their reasons are for feeling that way. Students who acted as main characters can share how they felt during the press conference, which questions were the most challenging to answer, whether there were other questions they would have asked if they had been journalists, and so on. Journalists can also be given

the chance to suggest how they would have answered certain questions if they had been acting as the main characters.

3. It is possible to hold another press conference with other students acting as the same main characters, but students may grow tired or bored. A better idea is to hold another press conference based on a different book or story, and make sure that the students who acted as characters the first time become journalists in the next press conference.

## VARIATIONS

1. To simplify the activity for lower levels, include prepared questions, or write question starters on the board, for students to ask when they are journalists. You can also pair up the journalists to come up with questions together. Other suggestions for classes that need language support are to take an active role in helping main characters prepare to answer questions, allow more time for preparation and practice, and choose roles for students based on your knowledge of their personalities (e.g., matching students with personalities that might be similar to the personalities of the characters in the story). You might also have two or three students represent each main character during the press conference; they can take turns answering journalists' questions, and they can support one another in case one student has difficulty answering a question.

2. For larger classes, if space allows, you can have students role-play in two big groups simultaneously.

3. During the press conference, have students who are acting as the main characters talk like the characters in the story and use the mannerisms of the character. In other words, they can "become" that character during the time of the press conference.

4. If necessary or helpful, you might want to model a press conference near the start of the activity. You might also be able to show a short video clip of an actual press conference.

5. You may want to have the class vote and give awards to students who asked or answered questions especially well. However, it should be remembered that the main purposes are to practice using language in a new and interesting way and to help all learners understand more about a book or story they have read.

6. This activity can be done successfully with online/virtual learning. As a teacher, you will have to assign roles or find a way for students to select their roles by chance. Then, students can meet in breakout rooms to prepare for the press conference. You can hold the actual press conference with all students together in the main meeting room.

7. The idea of a press conference can be expanded according to students' interest in a topic. Instead of characters from a reading text, students can play the role of sports stars, other celebrities, and movie characters while other students ask questions as journalists.

**Donista Solijonova** has taught English to adults, young learners, and teenagers at the School of Professional and Continuing Education (SPCE) at the University of Central Asia in Tajikistan. Donista is head of the Teachers Association of the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region and Conversational English Coordinator at the SPCE in Khorog.

GPS Designed, produced, and printed by Global Publishing Solutions (A/GIS/GPS) © (21-21741-E-1.0)

# Joke Matching

**The "jokes" below are not funny. That's because the questions and answers are mixed up—each question is not matched with the right punch line (the funny part of the joke). Your job is to match each question with the best punch-line answer to form a joke that is actually funny. Write the correct matches at the bottom of the page. The first one has been done for you (the punch line to the question Q1 is the answer A3). Can you match the rest?**

Question 1 (Q1): Why are the students taking a ladder to class?
Answer 1 (A1): Because they're really good at it.

Q2: What do you call bears with no ears?
A2: Tooth-hurty

Q3: What did one wall say to the other wall?
A3: Because they are in high school.

Q4: What kind of music does a balloon like least?
A4: A stick

Q5: Why don't we ever see elephants hiding in trees?
A5: A giant

Q6: What do you call a really big ant?
A6: Pop

Q7: What kind of table can you eat?
A7: B

Q8: What do you call a boomerang that doesn't come back?
A8: A vegetable

Q9: What is the best time to go to a dentist?
A9: I'm in glove with you.

Q10: What did the thumb say to the finger?
A10: I'll meet you at the corner.

**Write your matches here:**

**Q1's answer: A3** **Q2's answer: _____** **Q3's answer: _____** **Q4's answer: _____**

**Q5's answer: _____** **Q6's answer: _____** **Q7's answer: _____** **Q8's answer: _____**

**Q9's answer: _____** **Q10's answer: _____**

**Answers on page 26**

**Answers to *THE LIGHTER SIDE***

## JOKE MATCHING

Q1's answer: A3 [The students need a ladder because they are in *high* school.]
Q2's answer: A7 ["B" is *Bears* with the letters e-a-r-s deleted.]
Q3's answer: A10
Q4's answer: A6 ["Pop" is a kind of music and the sound a balloon makes when it is … popped.]
Q5's answer: A1 [Elephants are so good at hiding in trees that we never see them do it!]
Q6's answer: A5 [gi-ANT]
Q7's answer: A8 [vege-TABLE]
Q8's answer: A4
Q9's answer: A2 ["Tooth-hurty" sounds like "2:30."]
Q10's answer: A9

**Humor instruction is most effective when the humor is not merely humor for the sake of humor, but when it complements or expands on other aspects of the language-learning curriculum.**

(See page 2)

americanenglish.state.gov